



82

Checked

F
1189
22



TO THE READER

KINDLY use this book very carefully. If the book is disfigured or marked or written on while in your possession the book will have to be replaced by a new copy or paid for. In case the book be a volume of set of which single volumes are not available the price of the whole set will be realized.



Library

~~Checked~~

11976781

25

192

Class No. F 823

Book No. P31D

Acc. No. 8808 ✓

DARKER GROWS THE VALLEY

By the same Author

COTTAGE SINISTER

MURDER AT THE 'VARSITY

S.S. MURDER

DEATH IN THE DOVECOT

com.
M. 84.
627

DARKER GROWS THE VALLEY

BY
Q. PATRICK

"Darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting:
So were it with me if forgetting could be will'd."

—GEORGE MEREDITH.

San



CASSELL AND COMPANY LTD.
London, Toronto, Melbourne and Sydney

A. S. A. (large)
A. S. A. (small)

F 823
P 31 D

First Published, 1935

C 21
W 23-4-56

DARKER GROWS THE VALLEY

CHAPTER ONE

As far as I was concerned it all started on a certain Saturday evening in late November or early December. I am sure it was a Saturday because Toni and I had come home from the hospital earlier than usual. I am also certain that the autumn was well advanced, for I remember that it was almost dark when we passed the forbidding grey walls of the Alstones' house. Unfortunately, however, I have no record of the exact dates. Later on, when things began to assume such uncanny proportions, I had reason to wish that I had been more observant of the details of those first strange occurrences in Grindle Valley. But, like most of my neighbours, I never suspected at the beginning that I could ever be more than an onlooker in the grim game whose opening play I ignored so completely on this particular Saturday evening.

As we drove homeward, it was obvious to both Toni and me that something was wrong. At first I thought it must be a hunt, but Grindle was a

Darker Grows the Valley

conservative spot and did its hunting at conservative times. Whatever the event, the whole neighbourhood had turned out for it. There were little knots of villagers at every corner; in the woods we could hear the barking of dogs and there was an occasional gleam from a pocket-torch. Voices were audible even above the noise of the car, and every time we caught a face in the headlights, it wore an unfamiliar, important expression. Of course, we should have stopped to inquire, but we were both tired and dirty. We had been working hard all day on a new group of experiments. Besides, it was the week-end, and Valerie was coming in after dinner—Valerie and the Goschens.

“Didn’t know our rural areas were so densely populated,” grunted Toni, as he backed his car into our hideously inaccessible garage.

I thought no more about it at the time, but when I went upstairs to change for dinner, I could still hear shouts ringing across the valley. There was a restless, hopeless quality about them which gave me the impression that our neighbours had gone out to look for something which they knew they would never find—something of which they completely despaired. I remarked on this to Toni, who had just emerged magnificent from the shower. But he only grunted again.

And what could one really expect but a grunt

Darker Grows the Valley

from Dr. Antonio Conti, one of the youngest and smartest professors of pathology in America? What was the excitement of a few villagers to a man who had been quite unmoved on the day when he first isolated Conti's gram-positive organism from the blood stream of a patient with purulent endocarditis and thus gave medicine one of its most valuable diagnostic aids?

But for all his grunts, Toni was no heartless scientist. I was sure of that when we had first struck up a friendship as research workers and instructors at Rhodes University Hospital. It was Toni's influence that helped me to get in on all the most exciting laboratory experiments. It was he who had urged me to share with him the charming little farm-house which he had rented from Seymour Alstone in Grindle Valley some twenty miles out of town; and it was the handsome and aggressive Toni who borrowed from our richer neighbours guns for me to shoot with and horses for me to ride.

For some time now we had lived in style as only bachelors know how. We were far more comfortable than Mr. Alstone with his lonely old grey house and fleet of servants; far more comfortable than the good-natured Goschens, who were always overrun with wet-nosed children or noisy friends from town; far more comfortable than the emasculate Tailford-

Darker Grows the Valley

Jones whose wife was continually chasing after other men when she ought to have been making the best of a war-wrecked hero; and certainly far more comfortable than Valerie Middleton and her mother, who lived on the penurious charity of Seymour Alstone. Our tidy house and well-ordered meals were the envy of the entire married community, and there was hardly a single one of our friends who had not at some time or other made passes at Lucinda—our efficient coloured factotum.

She had just cleared away dinner and served coffee in the living-room when we learned the reason for the afternoon's unrest.

"The Goschens are early," remarked Toni, as a car drew up outside the door.

I switched on the porch light, but it was not the Goschens nor Valerie who entered. Jo Baines, the Alstones' gardener, stood at the door with a man whom I immediately recognized as the village constable.

Normally Baines wore the mournful expression of a man who has to provide for a large and growing family on the inadequate wages which Mr. Alstone reputedly paid his help. To-night he looked even more tragic than usual—a circumstance which my medical mind immediately associated with the condition of his wife and the prospect of yet another addition to his family.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Excuse me, Dr. Swanson, but I thought I'd stop by and ask here."

"Ask, Baines?"

The two men scanned our puzzled faces.

"Then you haven't heard, Doctor?"

"Heard what?"

"About my Polly." Baines's voice was low. "She's disappeared. Last night we think it was, though we can't be absolutely sure. Anyhow, we've been hunting all day."

"You mean to say that someone has kidnapped one of your children?"

I could not make out whether the strained note in Toni's voice came from polite indifference or incredulity.

"Hardly likely to be kidnapping, Dr. Conti," interposed the constable. "Jo here isn't exactly in a position to—well, they usually snatch for a ransom."

"We don't know much about it, Dr. Swanson." Baines had turned his sad eyes on me once again. "When last seen, she was going out into the big meadow behind our cottage after her kitten, which was always running away. She was afraid like—well, you know how 'tis with animals round here." He coughed apologetically. "Mark said he saw her calling to it about a hundred yards from the back door. That was about eight o'clock, and

Darker Grows the Valley

what with Mrs. Baines not being like you might say quite up to looking after the children properly just now, no one thought any more about it till this morning when our Polly wasn't there. You see, she's old enough to put herself to bed now, but her bed hadn't been slept in, and neither she nor the kitten has come back home since."

"So that's what they were all out after this evening!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. Everyone has been lending a hand. Mr. Alstone let some of the coloured help off from work this afternoon, and then his grandson was out too with young Mr. Foote from the medical school—they've all been searching, but we've not found hide nor hair of our Polly. Mrs. Baines is worrying herself sick and in her condition, as you know, Doctor . . ."

We made sympathetic noises and regretted that we had nothing tangible to suggest.

"I'm going to find her," said Baines as he rose to leave, and there was a strange gleam in his usually mild eye. "I'm going to find her if I don't eat a bite nor sleep until I've done it. There's other things been going on around here lately, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I'm going to find my Polly."

Throughout his speech I felt strangely moved. I say "strangely" because I am normally immune to

Darker Grows the Valley

any sort of psychic sensitivity and, at any rate, there is nothing particularly disturbing about a little girl failing to turn up at bedtime. But there was a certain quality about the man as he stood there, his shoulders bowed, his hands clenched at his sides, which made me feel that he knew, or suspected, something of which we had no knowledge—something rather horrible.

"Funny," remarked Toni after they had gone, "that when a poor family has seven children, most of whom are congenital idiots, they should get all het up because one of them mercifully disappears. She was a nasty little girl, anyway—one of the Baineses' less successful efforts."

"Wait till you feel the touch of baby fingers about your collar, Dr. Antonio Conti," I carolled.

"Baby fingers be——"

The intended obscenity was nipped in the bud by the arrival of Millie and Charlie Goschen, our nearest neighbours, who own a fair-sized property adjoining the Alstone estate. They are decent people who ride hard, drink hard and are fundamentally incapable of shooting a brace of pheasant or preserving a batch of peaches without bringing in a share to us. Millie always reminds me of a maternal cherub, if such a thing is possible, while her large, burly husband is still as young and fundamentally as ingenuous as any of his own

Darker Grows the Valley

innumerable children. His passion for horses is rivalled only by his wife's deep-rooted attraction for the sweets which she is always swearing to cut out of her diet.

That night they were full of the Baines child—at least, Millie was. Although she succeeded in being flippant, I could tell she was taking it rather hard. She moved restlessly in her chair and completely ignored the peanut brittle which had been provided especially for her. I suppose that nowadays the spectre of the kidnapper looms large in the mind of every well-to-do woman with children.

"I just don't see what can have happened," she was saying, throwing away her third cigarette, half-smoked. "I know the child was dumb, but surely there's never been a child dumb enough to forget to come in for breakfast—if those poor devils have such a thing as breakfast." Her plump face, usually so pink and shining, was slightly pale. "You don't suppose someone's run off with her, do you?"

I laughed reassuringly. "My dear Millie, people only steal for profit. By no stretch of imagination could you call Polly Baines profitable."

Millie did not reply, and in the brief interval of silence that followed, I thought I heard a faint cry outside in the valley. I supposed it was my imagination, but, as I strained my ears, it came again—long drawn and melancholy like some exotic night-

Darker Grows the Valley

bird. The others had heard it, too. Toni crossed to the window, pulling back the curtain.

"Mark Baines," he said. "Mark shouting after his sister."

It was rather eerie sitting there, listening.

Millie laughed nervously, and I guessed that her thoughts were still on her own flourishing family.

"Polly was always wandering about," she began suddenly. "I think she must have been a bit fey. Time and time again, and quite often in the late evening, I've bumped into her creeping through our property. If anyone had been hanging around, waiting for a chance to grab one of *our* kids—they might quite easily have got Polly by mistake." She lifted her hand from the table, and I noticed it had left a damp mark on the polished oak. "Something's been wrong with this place lately. For two cents and a stick of chewing gum I'd pack up this minute and take the children into Rhodes before—before anything else happens. Of course, Charlie's no millionaire, but——"

She broke off, laughing again. It was odd that a sane person like Millie, with her healthy passions for riding, shooting and child-bearing, should seem to be bordering on a neurosis.

We all sat around grinning rather stupidly until Charlie relieved the tension, crossing and patting his wife's shoulder.

Darker Grows the Valley

"My dear Millie, you're beginning to imagine things. You'll be saying next that Polly was Mrs. Baines's child by Seymour Alstone, and that the kidnappers are going to extort an enormous ransom from the old man."

Millie grinned up at Charlie affectionately and seized the opportunity to snatch his drink.

"Far more likely the old son of a gun kidnapped her himself. Anyone that's pulled as many fast ones in business as Seymour Alstone wouldn't stop at kidnapping if he felt like it. I expect he's got her locked up in one of those big empty rooms of his. Or maybe he's eaten her. Our kids call him the Big Bad Wolf."

Millie was quite herself again and launched on her favourite topic—one that was, incidentally, the favourite topic of the whole valley—the villainies, real or imaginary, of Seymour Alstone, the landlord from whom Toni and I rented our cottage. But we were not his only tenants. With a relentless determination to become "lord of the manor," old Seymour had been slowly buying up all the property in the neighbourhood. By now practically every estate had fallen into his rapacious clutches, and only the Goschens, with their four hundred acre farm, had managed to preserve a defiant independence.

"My dears!" Millie's face was shining again,

Darker Grows the Valley

pink and seraphic. "I must tell you the latest. I took Mrs. Baines some eggs to-day, and she was rabid about old Seymour—at least, as rabid as she dared be, poor soul, against her husband's employer. Apparently, he'd caught her young Tommy trespassing on his flower-beds last week, and the old scallawag lugged him round to the Baineses' cottage—personally, mind you—and wouldn't leave until he'd had the kid whipped right there and then before his eyes. Mrs. Baines said he just stood and gloated. I think it's positively indecent."

"But the funny part of it was," put in her husband with boyish glee, "that he sent Mark Baines out for a cane, and he came back with a split stick which made a hell of a noise but didn't hurt." He laughed. "Mark's not such an idiot as we all make out. You've got to be pretty smart to fool old Seymour Alstone."

"Aye, he's a hard man and just." Toni was collecting the empty glasses. "But so long as he lets us hunt over his property, I don't see that it matters what he does with his free time. If he wants to beat little children, God knows we've enough and to spare in the neighbourhood." He grinned at Millie.

Millie's come-back was cut short by the arrival of Valerie. Valerie Middleton is the type of girl who immediately makes herself felt in a roomful of

Darker Grows the Valley

people. What exactly is the secret of her charm, I have never been able to discover. It is not that she is particularly beautiful, although her tip-tilted nose and broad, mischievous smile are a constant delight. It is not that she is witty or brilliant. Luckily she has never caught the contemporary knack of twisting everything into a wisecrack. Perhaps it is her basic honesty that makes her what she is—the honest freshness of her appearance; the honest forthrightness of her manner; and the utter lack of self-consciousness or hypocrisy in her approach to men and women alike.

And she could so easily have become otherwise, for life had given her a great deal of the rough and very little of the smooth. She lived in a small cottage with her mother on the Alstone estate, and the Middletons' lapse into poverty had been almost as sensational as the Alstones' rise to wealth. Valerie's father, who had committed suicide some years ago, had been a brother of Mrs. Seymour Alstone, now long deceased, and had been connected with Seymour himself in a large steel firm just outside Rhodes. Rumour had it that old Alstone had sold the company's stock short to his own brother-in-law and, in the collapse of 1929, had made a killing in more senses of the word than one. Whatever the truth of this report, it was a known fact that Valerie and her mother were now so crippled finan-

Darker Grows the Valley

cially that they were obliged to live practically on the charity of the man who was supposed to have ruined them. Mrs. Middleton took it very hard, yet no one had ever heard Valerie say a malicious word against her uncle. But that was just like Valerie.

As she entered now, her pale, blond hair slightly tousled (for she never wore a hat), her cheeks coloured by the night air, it struck me for the hundredth time what a gorgeously eupeptic creature she was. It was a physical pleasure just to look at her after a day of pale, sickly faces at the hospital.

She grinned at us and then ran out into the hall, returning with a small and very sulky sealyham.

"Sorry about Sancho Panza," she said, "but I had to bring him. If I leave him with mother, they just get together and bark at everything."

Toni brought her a drink, and I watched her eyes smile into his.

"I'm late," she said, sipping it. "I'll have to hurry and catch up. No news of Polly, I suppose?"

We told her of Baines's visit.

"It's really awful. I feel so sorry for old Ma Baines. What do you think's happened?"

"Millie's just been saying your uncle ate her," remarked Toni.

Valerie laughed. She has a cool, clear laugh like a boy's.

"I expect he did. I'm really beginning to believe

Darker Grows the Valley

he is rather a wicked uncle. Mother's been in one of her denunciatory moods. I've heard nothing but your Uncle Seymour this, your Uncle Seymour that, all day."

I started to make some remark, but for the third time that evening we were interrupted. Outside there was the sound of a car stopping, followed by footsteps on the garden path. Our nerves must have been quite on edge by that time, because everyone looked apprehensively towards the door. Even Sancho Panza jumped up and then subsided, growling, behind Valerie's chair.

It turned out to be two of our students from the hospital—Gerald Alstone, old Seymour's grandson, and his friend, Peter Foote. As they entered they presented a violent contrast. Gerald was slight and meek. He always looked as though his childhood had been spent getting in the way of grown-ups who had no use for him. And now, in his twentieth year, he had a pathetic, unwanted air which, doubtless was due to the fact that his mother and father had been divorced when he was very young. Although he did not wear spectacles, his eyes had a trick of peering myopically at random objects which had no significance in themselves. He was awkward in company.

Peter Foote, on the other hand, was rather handsome in an easy, graceful way. Being the son and

Darker Grows the Valley

heir of very rich parents somewhere in Illinois, friends and self-assurance came easily to him. Before embarking upon his medical career, he had been sent twice round the world by his indulgent mother, and from his travels he had acquired that well-groomed sophistication which blossoms so often and so unexpectedly upon the emancipated middle-westerner. Although erratic and wildly impractical at times, I had always found him most responsive as a student, and Toni had said that he was the most brilliant and hard-working member of his pathology classes at Rhodes.

Neither of us could say the same for Gerald Alstone, who had great difficulty in "making the grade." Even his grandfather's money and threats looked as though they would not be sufficient to keep him at medical school another year if he did not make a better showing.

The two boys seemed tired after hunting all day for the missing child. They had nothing new to tell us. No clues of any sort had been found. Baines was still out. They had just met him and he had, apparently, repeated to them his vow not to rest until Polly was discovered.

I offered them a drink although I knew perfectly well that old Seymour, who was as much of an autocrat in his own house as he was in the neighbourhood, forbade his grandson to touch liquor.

Darker Grows the Valley

Gerald refused, flushing slightly as he did so. But Peter Foote, though a guest in the Alstone household, had no such scruples. He followed Toni into the kitchen, and I could hear their voices, excited over their recent series of experiments. The Goschens had withdrawn into themselves as they always did when there was a member of the Alstone family present. They sat a little apart from the rest of us, fiddling with their drinks, and it was left to Valerie to rescue the conversation by chatting amicably with her cousin, who always stared so closely into her face when talking to her that I sometimes wondered whether he was not in love with her.

We were all sitting around looking rather frigid, when Sancho jumped out of Millie's lap and ran to the door, barking frantically.

"Sancho, you ass," called Valerie, "this isn't your house. Who asked you to be a watch-dog?"

As she spoke there was a ring at the bell. It seemed that everyone in the neighbourhood had chosen that evening to call. But this was more than a call. It was a visitation. Roberta Tailford-Jones had burst into the room like an influenza epidemic. She was followed by Edgar, her diminutive husband, whom she completely overshadowed, usually to the point of hiding from view.

Despite the fact that she is hovering around the

Darker Grows the Valley

early forties, Roberta is the most magnificent woman in our community. To me, however, she always suggests an insect, or rather, a series of insects. Her hair is burnished like the wing of a Japanese beetle. Her eyebrows point upward like heraldic grasshoppers. Her mouth is long and soft like a coral slug, while her frequently gesticulating hands are somehow reminiscent of a praying mantis. I might also mention that she does not like me any better than I like her. To-night she was after my blood. There was a look in her eye that I knew of old.

She nodded distantly to our guests and then turned to me.

"Dr. Douglas Swanson, I demand an explanation." She towered over me and her husband as we stood with our backs to the wall, looking very foolish. "No, don't stop me, Edgar. I intend to handle this matter in my own way."

Colonel Tailford-Jones did not look as if he had the slightest intention of stopping her. Though he was reputed to have helped stop the German advance on the Argonne front, he had never been known to stop his wife in anything she wanted to do.

"If there is something you wish to say to me," I remarked mildly, "perhaps you'd care to talk it over in the dining-room."

Darker Grows the Valley

She gave a scornful laugh.

"I"—and she uttered the pronoun with significant emphasis—"I have nothing to say which cannot and should not be heard by everyone. Do you or do you not use animals in your vile experiments out at the college?"

"Why, of course, I—we——" I stammered, feeling like an interne faced with an irate chief.

"And have you been heard to say that the authorities do not give you enough creatures for these—these——?"

"I doubt whether you'll find any research worker in America who couldn't do with more than the quota of animals supplied."

"I thought as much," she snapped. "I knew I was right."

"My dear——" put in Edgar timidly.

But she brushed him aside like a cockroach, and wheeled triumphantly to the others.

"Now *that* explains where my Queenie has gone—the poor, poor precious!" She began to weep noisily, and through her tears we could hear: "I shall write to Dean Warlock to-night—a personal friend of my father's. I shall get in touch with Mrs. Scruggs, the Rhodes representative of the S.P.C.A. I shall——"

"Good God, Roberta's throwing a scene!"

Toni and Peter had come in from the kitchen,

Darker Grows the Valley

both disturbingly handsome after a liberal sampling of the drinks. The susceptible Roberta reacted to them immediately. For a moment I saw Toni through her eyes—the muscular expanse of chest, the splendid teeth, the dark, Italian hair. It made me feel very undersized and insignificant.

After a few liquid glances, Mrs. Tailford-Jones stated her case again, and this time, since it was for Toni's benefit, with slightly less vehemence. She had lost her pet marmoset, a horrible little animal which she had dyed to match her hair. Everywhere Roberta went Queenie was sure to go. In fact, it had clung so constantly to her shoulder that it had been difficult to tell where the monkey began and the woman ended. It had always gibbered and snarled at everyone else—especially at poor Edgar—but its gibbering days were now, apparently, over. It had, she averred, completely disappeared while she was out that afternoon. She had seen my car go past her house—the inference was obvious!

Toni had been listening with a curious smile on his lips.

"So you suggest that Doug and I smuggle animals out to the hospital, and vivisect them, eh?"

Roberta looked a bit foolish. In her wrath she must have failed to realize that her denunciation, meant for me, would inevitably include Toni.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Well, I think it’s all awful,” she muttered.
“ Terrible and cruel! ”

“ So now, Roberta, we’ve taken dear Queenie! You’d better search the house. Maybe you’ll find the Baines child, too.”

“ The Baines child? ”

Apparently Roberta had not heard the news about Polly. When we told her she became even more strident, and finally burst out with:

“ It’s positively unsafe to live in Grindle any more. There are things going on—animals tortured in laboratories.” She glanced darkly at me. “ It’ll be children next—if it isn’t already.” At that moment her eyes fell on the hapless Peter Foote, who was innocently wolfing down his third highball. “ You’re another of them. Don’t let me catch you around my place or I’ll—Valerie, I can’t imagine how you can bring that dog of yours here. You mark my words and look after it.”

Gerald, who had been playing with Sancho’s ears, stared short-sightedly at the sealyham and drew away his hand as though from a hot coal.

“ Experimental animals, indeed! Why don’t you so-called doctors experiment on each other? ”

Smiling lazily, Peter Foote rose.

“ An excellent idea, Mrs. Tailford-Jones. I’ve always thought that we ought to be allowed to experiment on human subjects.”

Darker Grows the Valley

"You little beast!" Roberta's blood-red mouth fell open. "You doctors are all just a bunch of sadists, pretending you're doing good to humanity."

With admirable politeness, Peter pulled the well-known gag and inquired whether, if one of Roberta's children were sick, she would refuse him the benefit of diphtheria antitoxin, pneumonia serum, adrenalin or other therapeutic agents whose usefulness had been proved largely through animal work.

But, as the Tailford-Joneses had no children and, short of an Old Testament miracle, were quite unlikely to have any, Peter's remark did not go down any too well with Roberta. Everybody in the valley knew that an unfortunately placed piece of shrapnel during the World War had made Edgar no fit husband for Roberta.

While the rest of us manfully upheld the decencies of polite conversation, Peter Foote continued to spar with Roberta. On both sides the sallies became more and more acrimonious until, at last, realizing that a vulgar scene was inevitable, Peter summoned Gerald from his corner and discreetly left the battlefield.

"Very odd!" spat Roberta, even before the door had closed behind the boys. "Very odd how those two boys are always about together. Never seen them with a girl or anything."

As this was the kind of equivocal remark that

Darker Grows the Valley

Roberta invariably made about any man, married or single, who was not actively engaged in having an affair with her, no one paid much attention. We flattered ourselves that we were a broad-minded community, but Roberta was just one of those Joneses that nobody wanted to keep up with. To me, personally, she had always been peculiarly poisonous, indulging herself by referring to me as "that microscopic runt." She had nothing against me, so far as I could see, except that I had never betrayed any consciousness of her luscious charms and that, in contrast with Toni's six foot four of splendid physique, I must have seemed rather a nonentity. That was one of the advantages of living with Toni. The amorous Robertas of the world passed me by. So—unfortunately—did the Valerie Middletons.

"I think I know what you mean, Roberta." Toni had caught up her last remark. "And all I can say is that I wish there were a few more students like Peter Foote at Rhodes. Give him five years and, in spite of his father's money, he ought to be one of the best pathologists in America. Now, have a drink and don't talk any more nonsense."

She had several.

As usual, Edgar Tailford-Jones, or the little colonel, as we sometimes called him, did not say a

Darker Grows the Valley

word. He is so inconspicuous an individual, and so completely submerged in the over-ripe personality of his wife, that it is difficult to remember whether or not he is in the room. It is difficult, too, to describe him. He is the direct antithesis of a colonel, or indeed of any military man. At a first glance he seems to have no face. When one tries to draw a picture of him in one's mind, only the mouth emerges, tiny and almost lipless, as though it had been stabbed out with a pencil point. He stood now in his corner, refusing liquor and cigarettes, and occasionally glancing uneasily in the direction of his wife, who was drowning her grief for Queenie in our whisky.

I cannot remember anything else that happened—at least, not anything of real significance. Despite desperate attacks with a powder-puff, Millie's nose grew more and more shiny as the drinks piled up. Charlie got me in a corner and poured out an elaborate and rather childish theory about the disappearance of Polly Baines. Toni and Valerie—as usual—looked a little too long into each other's eyes and, to Roberta's evident annoyance, spent a little too much time in the back kitchen. And, as I watched them, I felt, as usual, that queer constriction in the region which is poetically referred to as the heart but is probably the upper abdomen.

At last, I suppose, everyone left. We had all

Darker Grows the Valley

talked ourselves out, and Roberta had had at least one drink too many. The poor little colonel had some difficulty in supporting her into the car, and she was still talking about Queenie and “vivvysexshun” when Edgar drove her off.

“Well, what do you say, old man?” I asked, as Toni took off his shirt in the living-room. He had an unconventional habit of dressing and undressing anywhere but in the right place.

“Roberta’s a goddam fool. But”—he started to switch off the lights—“something is rotten in the Vale of Grindle.”

And this remark is memorable in itself, because I never knew before that Toni had even heard of Shakespeare.

CHAPTER TWO

THE next day was a Sunday. After breakfast Toni and I borrowed two horses from the Goschens and went for a long ride to blow away the cobwebs of the night before. It was a clear day, sparkling and young. We galloped like centaurs over the hard, frosty fields and through woods brown with autumn. We climbed to Old Grindle Oak—a patriarchal evergreen standing on the top of the highest hill in the neighbourhood—and raced each other down again. I had forgotten all about Polly Baines.

She was brought back to my mind very forcibly, however, when we struck the road and the honk of a horn made me draw up to avoid a passing car. A middle-aged man was smiling out at me.

“Well, Dr. Swanson!”

It was my old friend, Felix Bracegirdle.

Toni rode on, but I immediately dismounted and tethered Esmeralda to a tree. With Bracegirdle in the car were Jo Baines and a man whom I had never seen before. Bracegirdle shook me warmly

Darker Grows the Valley

by the hand and said that he had been appointed Sheriff's Deputy in the Polly Baines investigation. I did my best to be helpful and told him about Roberta's marmoset.

"Yes, we've heard plenty about that already," he said with a significant smile. "'Love thy neighbour' doesn't seem to go so hot around here, eh? Well, well, I don't believe all I hear."

It was evident from his tone that Bracegirdle had already interviewed Mrs. Tailford-Jones, and that she had, as usual, been none too polite about me. He gave me a friendly smile.

I had known before that Bracegirdle was in some way connected with the county police authorities, but I had not realized that he would have jurisdiction in our own particular neighbourhood. Our friendship had started during the summer under rather remarkable circumstances. His wife had been brought into the University Hospital almost moribund with a rare blood disease characterized by a white-cell count of about two hundred, and a total absence of polys. It so happened that I did the hæmatological work on her case and suggested agranulocytic angina, which afterwards proved to be the correct diagnosis. I also suggested that the case be treated with pentnucleotide, then a comparatively new and unheard-of drug which could not be obtained in the small town of Rhodes. Together,

Darker Grows the Valley

Bracegirdle and I had raced through the night to Lampson, where we woke up someone in the wholesale drug firm and procured this new remedy. Mrs. Bracegirdle's response had been spectacular, and her husband always attributed the miracle of her recovery to me, though, indeed, I had done nothing but what common sense and good medicine dictated. During that long drive to and from Lampson I had got to know the man pretty well—at least, well enough to be glad for Baines's sake that he was on the job. I had developed a great respect for him, and I think that he, too, believed in and trusted me as an almost omniscient creature.

"Any more news?" I asked seriously.

"No, Doctor. We've combed the countryside for ten miles round without a trace." Bracegirdle removed his hat and scratched his greying hair. "A nine-year-old kid can't get far under her own steam—let alone a young kitten. We're going off to get some bloodhounds before the scent gets cold."

"Gosh, that'll be fun—I mean, fine."

I glanced nervously at Baines, but he had not heard me.

"Well, if you'd like to come along, we'll be back at the Baineses' place by around two. The state troopers are going to lend a hand and it might be

Darker Grows the Valley

a good idea to have a doctor along. You never know."

When I arrived at the Baineses' cottage that afternoon, I found quite a crowd of people collected. I could tell from their eager eyes and unnaturally swift voices that the excitement of the day before had not abated. Bracegirdle was talking solemnly with Franklin Alstone, Gerald's father, who had a sinecure and a large salary in the steel mills which had once belonged to old Seymour. He was a withered stick of a man with a droop and a bald head and, although barely forty-five, looked every bit as old as his septuagenarian father with whom he lived in the large Alstone house. Like his son, Gerald, he had a peering, furtive look. Like Gerald, too, he was completely under the domination of the old man. It was obvious that he had been sent to represent Seymour in this last desperate attempt to find Polly Baines.

In the garden a state trooper was showing off the two bloodhounds with great pride to a group of dirty little Baines kids. They seemed fascinated, just as I would have been at their age, for I had always connected bloodhounds with something particularly exciting and sinister. But these friendly creatures certainly belied their names as they licked hands, fawned on all and sundry, and made strange wheezing sounds like an old asthmatic.

Darker Grows the Valley

While they were giving the dogs the scent, I went upstairs to say a few words of professional encouragement to Mrs. Baines. The poor woman's pregnancy was far advanced and she did not seem to take in much of what was going on around her. I supposed that Dr. Thompson, our local G.P., was keeping her pretty much under the influence of sedatives. She seemed hardly to realize that one of her many children had been lost. But perhaps her arithmetic, like her fertility, resembled that of the birds and lower mammals.

When I got out into the sunshine again, the state trooper was holding the dogs on a leash. Slowly they started to pick out the scent on the hard gravel of the garden path. For a while it seemed almost as if they were snuffing aimlessly, their noses to the ground. Then they began to move slowly forward, and the rest of us followed. Apparently the scent was still good, despite the lapse of time. As we passed out into the meadow behind the house one could almost imagine the figure of Polly Baines luring us onward like a will-o'-the-wisp. Silently, ploddingly, the bloodhounds went on, lifting their muzzles now and again to stare round at their master as if for approval. They skirted the side of an adjoining field, in and out of a little ditch that marked it off, and once again it seemed, we could see Polly chasing her kitten in and out of

Darker Grows the Valley

that little ditch. There was an excitement, a queer, impersonal thrill in this hunt, such as I had never felt in my life before.

At length the dogs turned towards the old dirt road with which we had been running parallel, and followed it to a fringe of woodland about half a mile from the cottage. Here they paused and sniffed the air.

"They've lost it," growled the trooper, and, as if to corroborate his statement, the hounds turned round and looked at him with bloodshot apology in their eyes.

One of them licked his hand.

"She can't be far off," exclaimed Franklin Alstone absently. "Let's start our search here."

Baines was already moving in and out of the woods shouting: "Polly!" at the top of his lungs. He had the wild, frustrated exuberance of a man who had got so near and yet so far. Every time his voice rang out we all tensed ourselves to listen. But there was no reply.

The trooper unleashed the dogs and for a while they nosed around in little circles.

"Looks like she must have been picked up in a car," commented Bracegirdle. "Where does this road lead to?"

Franklin Alstone explained that it was an old, almost disused lane which led from Grindle Meadow

Darker Grows the Valley

to the cottage where Toni and I lived. We could see the deep ruts made by generations of cart-wheels, but the ground was too hard for the impression of automobile tires. It would have been rough riding for a car.

Meanwhile I noticed that one of the dogs, intent on some purpose of its own, had moved away and was disappearing into the woods. We followed him with our eyes, and for a moment nobody spoke. Soon he came trotting back. In his mouth was a furry body which, at first glance, I took to be a large rabbit or a ground-hog. Wagging his tail proudly, the hound laid his burden at his master's feet. As he did so, I caught a glimpse of Baines's face. It was drawn and haggard like the face of a man in mortal agony.

Bracegirdle's broad back obscured my vision and I could not see at first what it was that the dog had brought. A low whistle of excitement made me step forward.

Lying on the brown grass at our feet lay the dead body of a small monkey—the marmoset which had belonged to Roberta Tailford-Jones. I could see at once that it had been dead for some hours, and it had been ripped up the belly so that its viscera glistened in the sunlight. The scavengers of the woods had been at it already. It looked, as it lay there, like the mockery of a child's body. I under-

Darker Grows the Valley

stood at once the expression I had just seen on Baines's face.

"Good God!" It was Franklin Alstone who spoke first. "This is something devilish!"

Then everyone started talking at once, and I can't remember half of what was said. Eventually, I know, the body was carefully wrapped up, and we went back to the Baines's cottage.

As we passed through the garden gate, Bracegirdle beckoned me aside.

"Of course Baines is upset just now," he whispered, "and I don't want to cause any more trouble in the family, but this—er—monkey business"—he paused to smile at his own unconscious pleasantry—"this puts what you might call quite a different slant on things, Dr. Swanson. I'd like to have a word with that eldest Baines boy, the one who's not quite right in the head. Can you tell me anything about him?"

I nodded.

"They say Mark Baines is a natural around here, but I'd call him more of a naturalist. He works as a kind of part-time gardener and has a real gift for flowers. He's made our little wilderness blossom like the rose."

Bracegirdle lowered his voice still more.

"We-ell, he was brought up not so long ago for hurting two little girls on the Lampson road. Their

Darker Grows the Valley

mother lodged a complaint against him. He said that they'd caught a song-bird in a trap and all he wanted was to get it away from them and set it loose."

"Just like Mark," I commented.

"He was let off with a warning that time, but—when a fellow's not right in his head and things like this are going on——"

I laughed.

"Mark is as soft-hearted as a girl. He could no more hurt an animal—here, look for yourself."

I led Bracegirdle to the disused stable which was Mark's living quarters. The ground floor was lined with hand-made cages in each of which there was some living creature. A young fox, stinking to high heaven; a weasel with its leg carefully bandaged; a white owl and an enormous black snake. There were several other animals in this extraordinary menagerie. Mark's sympathies were catholic.

"Don't tell old man Alstone about this," I continued, "but Mark's place is a regular happy hunting-ground for destructive vermin. He goes and gets them out of traps, looks after them until they are well, and lets them loose again."

Bracegirdle sniffed.

"Well, if he can live in this stink, he must be queer in the head."

But if the downstairs part of the stable smelt bad,

Darker Grows the Valley

the loft where Mark lived and slept was a veritable paradise of lovely odours. These came from the plants and flowers which he kept there and tended with all the passionate devotion of his warped nature. Begonias, chrysanthemums, hyacinths, flowers in season and out of season, tropical and indigenous, brightened the dusty atmosphere of the loft until it blossomed like a gorgeous Chinese tapestry or the greenhouse of a millionaire. As a doctor I had often protested to Mark against sleeping in an atmosphere so deprived of oxygen—but he seemed to thrive on it.

As we climbed the ladder and proceeded through the trap-door, I saw, to my surprise, that Mark was at home. Quickly I stepped backwards to speak to Bracegirdle.

“Let me do the talking,” I whispered. “We’ll get further that way, if you don’t mind. For some unknown reason Mark likes and trusts Dr. Conti and me. He doesn’t take to most people around here and he might be difficult with you.”

Bracegirdle nodded, and we pushed our way inside. Mark was bending over some fine amber chrysanthemums and did not look up as we entered.

“This gentleman’s interested in flowers,” I explained, and after a suspicious glance at Bracegirdle, Mark started to show his treasures, pronouncing their long names with uncanny accuracy. Brace-

Mark Grows the Valley

girdle was tactful and showed himself to be no mean horticulturist.

Mark's face, as he bent over his favourite blooms, was a study for a sculptor. His long, dark hair and large, vacant eyes made me think irresistibly of a wild, exotic plant which had been metamorphosed by some magic into a country lad of eighteen. At first glance, he looked normal enough. It was only those weird, luminous eyes and the flat shape of the back of his head which showed him to be—different.

After we had botanized for a while, I broached the subject of his sister's disappearance.

"Well, Mark, this is a bad business about Polly."

He sat down on the edge of the dilapidated mattress which was his bed and stared from one to the other of us without speaking. I noticed, as I had often done before, that a sort of film had come over his eyes. He looked like a person who lives in a world other than our own—as one who has crossed the barrier which separates the known from the unknown.

"It isn't no use to go looking for Polly," he remarked slowly. "She's gone and her kitty's gone too. The kitty's dead and that I know, and if the kitty's dead Polly's dead too, and it's no more use you chasing around after her. No."

He was looking down as he spoke and playing with the thick hairs on his muscular arms. It was

Darker Grows the Valley

extraordinary, I thought idly, that any youth could resemble at once a flower and a gorilla.

“No more use,” he repeated dully.

Bracegirdle was staring at me, obviously awaiting his cue.

“What makes you say that, Mark?” I interposed hurriedly.

“It’s like this.” He shook his head as if in pity of my ignorance. “That kitty of our Poll’s was very wild. She wouldn’t come to no one but me, but as soon as she heard my voice, she’d come runnin’ up. I used to save her the milk from my supper.”

“Yes, but——”

“Well, I was out all last night calling after her—and calling. And there wasn’t a neck of the woods around here as I didn’t go in—but she didn’t come. So that kitty’s dead and gone, and, if she’s dead and gone, well, Polly’s dead and gone too.”

With the serene philosophy of the mentally deficient, he seemed amused that we should continue to question the inevitable—that we should probe with impious fingers into the mysteries which he calmly accepted. There was no more to be said.

As we crossed the garden towards the cottage, I saw the tall, erect figure of Seymour Alstone dismounting from his horse. He was hatless and his magnificent mane of dark hair, flecked only here and there with white, seemed like a reproach to his

Darker Grows the Valley

son's sparsely covered head. He greeted me with a curt nod and turned to the Sheriff's Deputy.

"In charge of this investigation, Bracegirdle?" His voice rang out like a pistol-shot.

"Yes, Mr. Alstone."

"Well, you don't seem to be making much progress. My men must get back to work to-morrow. Can't spare 'em any longer."

Bracegirdle assured him that their help was no longer necessary and went on to relate the incidents of the afternoon. Seymour Alstone listened intently, his large head thrust forward, his ferrety eyes boring holes through Bracegirdle as he occasionally fired some pertinent question. It was no wonder, I thought, that the Goschen kids called him the Big Bad Wolf. One expected a large red tongue to loll out any minute. He seemed ravenous for details.

When Bracegirdle described the finding of the dead marmoset, Seymour turned to his son and, instinctively, so it seemed to me, a note of contempt came into his voice.

"Did this animal belong to anyone *you* know, Franklin?"

"Why—er—yes, I think so." Franklin Alstone was tugging nervously at his high-necked collar, and I remember having the distinct impression that he looked even more nervous and furtive than he

Darker Grows the Valley

usually did when addressed directly by his father. "It belonged to Mrs. Tailford-Jones, I think. At least I——"

"Hm! Nice sort of a pet!" The old man made a disdainful motion with his head.

A flush came into Franklin's sallow cheeks. Though bordering on middle age, it seemed as if he would never get over the unreasonable awe in which he had always held his father. Only once—according to popular rumour—had he opposed the old man's wishes, and that was when he had eloped with Gerald's mother, from whom he had now long been divorced.

Seymour had by this time started to heckle Bracegirdle. I made off, feeling rather embarrassed.

Baines was waiting for me when I went to get my car. His hand shook as he took a cigarette from my proffered case. The events of the past two days had aged him considerably.

"Dr. Swanson," he said, "I'd like to speak to you."

"Surely."

"There's things connected with this business which aren't what they ought to be." The injured eyes of all the oppressed lower classes in the world were looking at me from his. "This monkey's not the first animal to go. Last week old Mrs. Marvin lost her tabby cat. And there's Brewer's sheep found slit up in a ditch. Things aren't right round

Darker Grows the Valley

here, Doctor. But you know how it is. Even if I was to have my suspicions, I couldn't say nothing—not even to the police.”

Slightly bewildered, I nodded.

“Well, if I did find anything, I was wondering whether I could get in touch with you in private.”

“Sure, call me at the hospital any time. I'll keep it under my hat. Rhodes 21, extension 59. And”—I paused and looked at him as sympathetically as I knew how—“I'm terribly sorry, Baines. I'll do anything I can to help.”

I had not driven more than a quarter of a mile towards home when I met the Tailford-Joneses' car. Roberta beckoned me to stop and asked for news. Despite the indiscretions of the night before she looked perfectly stunning in her Sunday clothes. Edgar looked suitably stunned. As indeed any man, with little but a war-pension to live on, might have been if he had to pay the bill for all that finery. Roberta's elaborate wardrobe was another little mystery in the valley, and one that had often intrigued Millie Goschen and all the other female inhabitants of Grindle.

I described to them the finding of the monkey's dead body.

At first Roberta started to cry. Then she fumed and stormed. Then she began using words which are commonly represented in print by asterisks.

Darker Grows the Valley

Her tear-stained face was distorted with fury. The make-up ran all over the lot. She would, I'm sure, have torn her improbable hair if her hat had not been such an expensive one.

"Edgar, drive on. Find that man Bracegirdle. Find him, wherever he is."

The little colonel started the engine meekly. Then he turned to me and spoke for the first time.

"You're quite sure that the marmoset is dead?" His pin-prick mouth had formed itself into a tiny "o."

"Dead as——"

But he was not listening. A violent attack of sneezing had apparently dulled his senses. He was holding a handkerchief in front of his face and making strange, inarticulate noises such as I had not heard since the end of the hay-fever season.

"Hurry up, Edgar."

Edgar hurried up, but, before he drove on, I had caught a glimpse of two malicious little devils dancing in his eyes.

He had—probably for the first time in the course of his whole married life—been roaring with laughter.

CHAPTER THREE

It was quite a relief after the disquieting events of the week-end to get back to the comparative peace of my laboratory in Rhodes. Here the continuous struggle of life against death made the disappearance of one little girl seem relatively unimportant. After all, I was not a detective. My friendship with Bracegirdle and the kindly feeling I had for the Baines family (especially Mark) were the only links that really bound me to the case. My job was research work in medicine, not in crime, and there were other things to occupy my mind besides vanished children and dead monkeys. Of course, I did not then know that the incidents of the past few days were merely warning symptoms before the pandemic of horror that was so soon to terrorize the inhabitants of Grindle Valley.

Bracegirdle turned up several times during the week, asked me a lot of questions and reported very little progress. There had been no further clue to Polly's disappearance, and no evidence which elucidated the death of Mrs. Tailford-Jones's marmoset.

Darker Grows the Valley

Nor could anyone offer a particularly good alibi for Friday night or Saturday evening—the times when the two disappearances had occurred. Bracegirdle, it seemed, was relying more and more on me for help, though it was very little that I had to offer. The problem, in his mind, had already developed into a case for the doctor or alienist rather than the police.

I remember that I was very busy at the time on a paper for the Hæmatological Society, and I did not altogether welcome these intrusions. Still less did I welcome an interruption of another kind which occurred towards the end of the week. I was in the middle of a demonstration to my students when I was sent for by the Dean of the Medical School.

Dr. Warlock was a pompous old ass from whom I wanted nothing except his signature on my salary cheque at the end of each month.

“Sit down, Dr. Swanson—if you please.”

I sat on the edge of my chair, and for a second or two we looked at each other with well-balanced animosity.

“You and Dr. Conti live together out in Grindle, I believe?”

“Yes, Dr. Warlock.”

“You are both very young to hold such responsible positions in the college.”

Darker Grows the Valley

I informed him politely that I was thirty-two and Toni thirty-five—no spring chickens, I might have added, to anyone except an old foggy like him.

“Well, well, you are still at an age when you might perhaps be addicted to—er, shall we say sky-larking?” He was making a heavy attempt to sound indulgent and paternal. “You and Dr. Conti,” he continued, “are both engaged in animal work, I believe?”

I nodded.

“And you have the usual difficulty in getting all the material you want——?”

“Dr. Warlock,” I interrupted. “Have there been complaints about me? I take all the routine precautions with my laboratory animals. I devocalize the dogs. I use anæsthesia to avoid unnecessary pain. I——”

“Oh, there is no question of your efficiency, or ability, Dr. Swanson. I was just wondering whether, perhaps, you had tried to enlarge our somewhat limited supply of animals from—outside sources.”

I saw now what he was driving at. Roberta Tailford-Jones had actually lodged her crazy complaint. She was a woman without sense or intelligence, but she had political influence at Rhodes. Dean Warlock was a friend of her father's.

“It's both preposterous and insulting,” I said angrily.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Come, Dr. Swanson, I am not accusing you. I only want your co-operation.” He took two or three letters from his desk. “I have received complaints this week from the Anti-Vivisection Society, the S.P.C.A. and certain—private individuals. It appears that various household pets have been missing in your neighbourhood. There is a hint of an outrage of a more serious nature. They threaten investigation. I am asking your help to avoid a scandal.”

“It’s all nonsense, Dr. Warlock. There’s a silly woman in Grindle who lost her pet monkey, which, incidentally, has been found dead in a ditch! A child disappears under mysterious circumstances, but it is fantastic to imagine that either Dr. Conti or I would do anything so foolish as to—why, it’s laughable.”

The Dean looked at me sadly.

“You are very young, Dr. Swanson, and you do not realize how careful one has to be where experimental animals are concerned. Ours is a great country, Dr. Swanson, but it is inclined to be a sentimental one. And the sentimentalists can cause a lot of trouble. A story like this in the newspapers—even a famous university such as Rhodes could never live it down.”

I knew he was speaking nothing but the truth. There were a great many Robertas in the world.

“You don’t think that, perhaps, some of the

Darker Grows the Valley

students——? Young Alstone lives in the neighbourhood." The Dean lowered his voice discreetly, as most people did at the name of Alstone.

"No, sir. Gerald Alstone is a shy, retiring fellow. He doesn't even like to go out hunting with his grandfather. He hasn't the spunk to hurt a fly."

"And there's that other lad, Peter Foote. I understand he stays with the Alstones quite a lot. He used to be rather headstrong and excitable at one time, though now, they tell me, he's quieted down considerably."

"Foote's as clean-cut and normal a boy as ever lived. A very able student, too."

Dean Warlock nodded.

"That's just what I would have thought," he said slowly.

"And," I continued, "in the very unlikely event that either of these two boys wanted to conduct private experiments, they are both very well-off. They could purchase animals for themselves."

The Dean tapped his paper-knife on the desk.

"Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you, Dr. Swanson."

I returned to the laboratory where a few of my students were still waiting, and finished the demonstration which dealt, if I remember correctly, with normal reticulocyte response to liver extract. I was just clearing up a few additional points when the

Darker Grows the Valley

telephone rang. I recall that Gerald Alstone went to answer it and said it was for me.

Baines was on the wire. His voice sounded almost faint with earnestness. He wanted to know if he could see me just as soon as I got back home. There was something—something which he had to talk over with me at once. I told him I was dining out that evening but would be going for a ride early the next morning.

“Well, Dr. Swanson,” he concluded, “if I can’t get in touch with you before, look for me around eight o’clock by the Mill Pool.”

“All right, Baines. Eight o’clock to-morrow morning at the Mill Pool. I’ll be there.”

I dismissed the class and went down to get my car.

Toni and I had both been invited to dinner and bridge with Seymour Alstone that night, but my room-mate, who rarely played bridge and who objected on principle to evenings where one could neither smoke nor drink, had refused on some flimsy excuse. Secretly I was very glad of his refusal, because it meant that Valerie would be invited in his place.

And very lovely she looked when I entered Seymour Alstone’s enormous living-room at seven o’clock that evening. In this gloomy house she was youth and vitality itself. She was charming even

Darker Grows the Valley

to her "wicked uncle," and, although cocktails were not served, her very presence was sufficient to put my senses into a state of pleasant intoxication. Franklin was there, too, bony and bald, but no one paid any attention to him.

Seymour Alstone himself was always at his best when acting the host, and there was something almost benign about his fine old grizzled head as he took his place at the top of the dinner-table. Indeed, the party was normally gay and lively as long as Gerald and Peter Foote were there. It was Peter who was largely responsible for this liveliness, for he wisecracked in front of the old man just as though he were a human being instead of the traditional tyrant of the valley. Several times during dinner Seymour actually broke into a hearty chuckle.

It was not until the two boys left and we settled down to bridge that the familiar sobriety always associated with the Alstone household descended on the party.

By some strange anomaly in his character, Seymour Alstone, while forbidding cigarettes and alcohol in his house, had no objection to playing bridge for money. By some even stranger kink in his nature, he seemed particularly to enjoy playing for fairly high stakes with the girl whose father he had ruined. Of course, since Valerie had not a penny of her own, he was obliged to carry her as his

Darker Grows the Valley

partner, defraying her losses and allowing her to keep her winnings. But he did not make such a bad investment at that. She was an extremely good player—far better than my partner, the timid Franklin, who always underbid his hand and seemed terrified of setting his father or even of making a contract against him.

The evening wore tediously on. At eleven o'clock Valerie decided it was time to go home. I paid my losses and went to get my coat. We were all assembled in the hall when Gerald came in by himself. He blinked at us a moment and then said casually:

“ Oh, Dr. Swanson, I just met Mark down the road. By the way, I believe his father's been looking for you. Have you seen him yet? ”

“ No.” I answered with some curtness, annoyed that my private appointment with Baines had thus been made common knowledge.

Old Seymour, who was not included in this conversation, looked from his grandson to me with a suspicious frown.

“ What's this about Baines? ” he asked gruffly.

Reluctantly I was forced to explain how the gardener had called me that afternoon on purely personal business, and urged them to consider the matter as confidential. I was not very convincing, but I hoped that Seymour would suppose the inter-

Darker Grows the Valley

view to have some connection with Mrs. Baines's state of health.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Gerald's face fell as he listened. "I heard you talking to him over the 'phone in your laboratory this afternoon. I didn't know it was private."

"Well, Gerald," I commented mildly, "you're going to be a doctor yourself, and you ought to realize that physicians never discuss professional affairs. It doesn't matter this time just so long as you don't let it go any farther."

The boy flushed and looked down shamefacedly.

"I'm afraid I've already told the Tailford-Joneses," he faltered. "Peter and I met them in the road just after dinner, and that woman asked so many questions that before I knew where I was——"

"If you've told Roberta," I broke in, smiling a little grimly, "that means the whole village knows about it by now. But I suppose it can't be helped."

"It can indeed!" The expression on Seymour Alstone's face reminded me of one of the Old Testament prophets. "How many times, Gerald, must I tell you not to gossip about affairs which do not concern you? If you spent more of your time studying instead of wasting it in idle chatter, you wouldn't be such a disappointment to your father and me."

Franklin, who had been standing a little apart from the rest of us, nodded his head vaguely as if

Darker Grows the Valley

to show that the old man's words had his full approbation.

Gerald looked up at his father and grandfather, and, for an instant, his eyes revealed an expression of long-pent antagonism and resentment.

"Mrs. Tailford-Jones kept asking me questions," he said sullenly. "I had to be polite."

"Polite!" Seymour gave a scornful laugh. "Politeness is only another name for weakness. When are you going to learn to have a will of your own?"

"Oh, let it go," I murmured, anxious to cut short this family scene so that I might take Valerie home.

"Will of my own!" echoed Gerald, peering closely at his grandfather and speaking with far more spirit than I had ever heard before. "Whose fault is it if I haven't one? Who bosses me about all the time; tells me what I must do and what I mustn't; when I can go out; when I must work; whom I shall see and whom I shan't? What else can you expect, I'd like to know?"

He broke off suddenly, catching his breath as if surprised at the temerity of his own outburst.

Both Franklin and Seymour had been listening in blank amazement. All three Alstones appeared utterly to have forgotten Valerie and myself. Gerald was staring at his grandfather, pale and breathing rather hard. Gradually the excitement drained out

Darker Grows the Valley

of his face and he seemed to give way to an emotional collapse. Pushing the hair from his forehead in a small, helpless gesture, he slipped away down the corridor.

Valerie and I left almost without saying good night to our host. As we passed through the front door, I heard Seymour say to Franklin:

"Very unpredictable, your boy." His tone seemed to include his own middle-aged son in the accusation. "Very unpredictable, indeed! He's beginning to take after his mother."

"You've certainly got a queer lot of relatives, Valerie," I remarked as I helped her into the car.

"Poor Gerald," she said softly. "I'd do anything to help him, but it's hopeless. He's so suspicious of everything and everybody. Peter Foote seems to be the only person in this world that he trusts."

As she spoke, the dining-room window was flooded with light. From our position outside we could see two people enter, shutting the door cautiously behind them. They were Peter and Gerald. Peter had produced something from his pocket and was handing it to his friend. I noticed, to my amused surprise, that it was a hip-flask.

"If Seymour saw that," I said, laughing, "it would be the end of Peter Foote."

As usual, Valerie and I talked about Toni on

Darker Grows the Valley

the drive home. Some strange fascination always impelled me to bring up the subject for fear, perhaps, lest she should broach it first. I had hoped for a *tête-à-tête* upon arrival, but there was a light in the living-room—a sure sign that Mrs. Middleton had waited up, as she always did when Valerie was spending the evening with her neighbouring relatives. She had, she was wont to explain grimly, lost one of her family through the machinations of Seymour Alstone, and she was not going to lose another if she could help it.

Mrs. Middleton, though normally a kind-hearted woman with a turn for pessimism, lead the field in her bitterness against the Alstones. Time and time again—privately and in public—she bit the hand that was feeding her. It was embarrassing for all parties concerned, especially for Valerie. I could see now that she did not want me to come in and meet her mother, who would probably be in one of her worst moods. Reluctantly I said good-night from the car, watching her eyes shine in the head-lights as she turned to smile at me.

Her parting words were: “Give my love to Toni.”

But I was not able to deliver her message, for on my return I found that Toni was not at home. I had no idea where he was. We had tacitly adopted the principle of not prying into one another’s affairs.

Darker Grows the Valley

As I slammed the front door, I noticed an envelope lying on the mat. It contained a note from Baines which read:

Please don't forget about to-morrow. I shall be there.

Respectfully,
JO BAINES.

For some reason or other I felt a vague sensation of uneasiness as I undressed and went to bed.

It had, however, completely vanished next morning when, after a good night's rest, I walked over to the Goschens's stable and, taking advantage of a standing invitation, saddled my favourite mare, Esmeralda.

It was seven o'clock as we set out, and a slight frost during the night had sprinkled the fields and the roadside with a powdering of white. A pearly mist was rising from Grindle Creek. The whole world was fresh and newly awakened.

After a brisk ride I turned my horse towards the Old Mill Pool where I was to meet Baines. As I galloped onward I started, for the first time, to wonder about the significance of his strange call—of his feverish anxiety to see me. If he had news of his daughter, why had he not gone direct to Bracegirdle? Could there be anything shameful in the life of this simple, hard-working man—some-

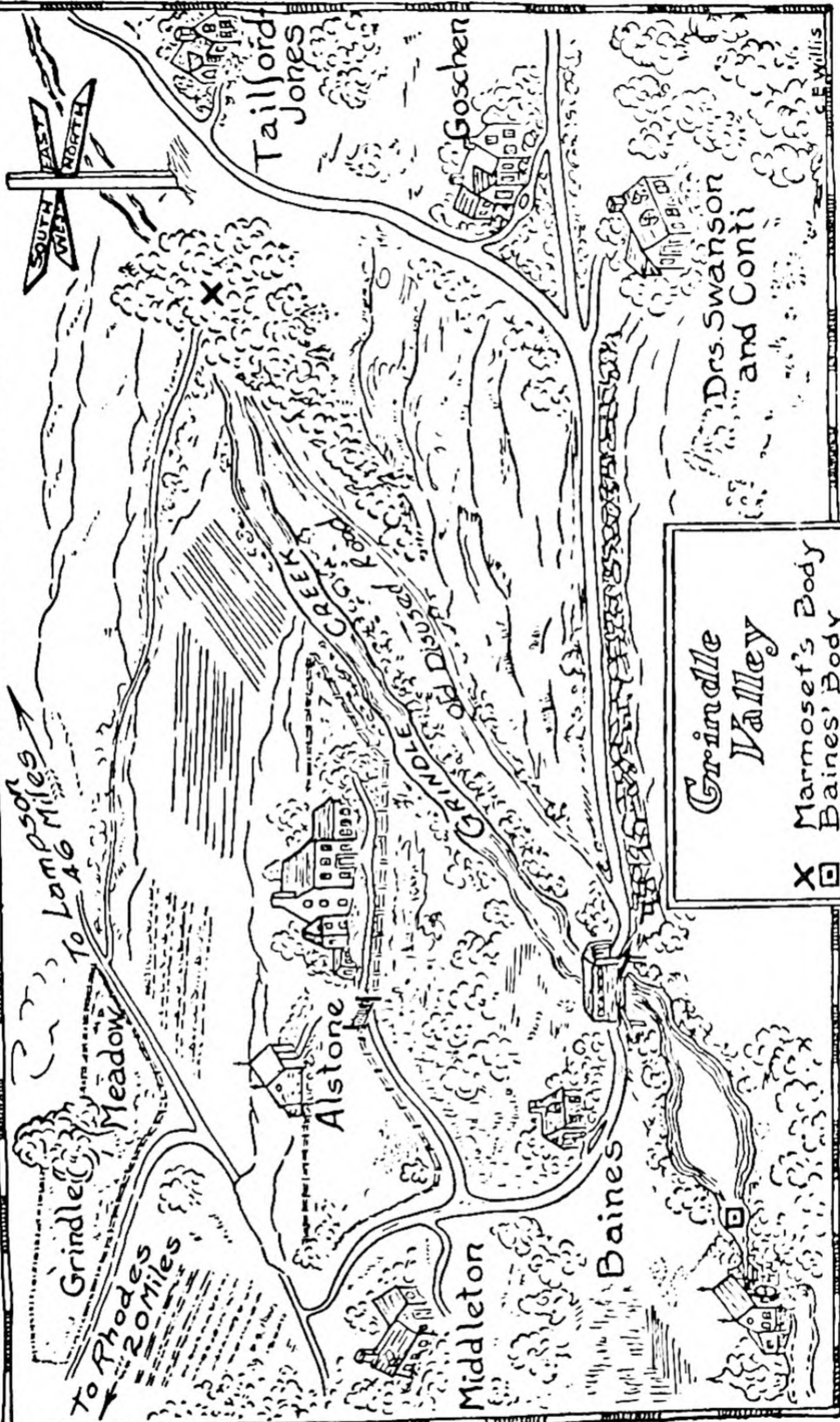
Darker Grows the Valley

thing that must be kept from the authorities? Or had it been fear that had sealed his lips to all except me? And, if so—fear of what?

I dismounted at the Old Mill Pool and, being a little before my time, lit a cigarette. Esmeralda started to chew the grass that grew green by the edge of the creek. Idly I watched the sparse waterfall that trickled over the dam. There was no sign of Baines.

Esmeralda, her head down, was moving along the bank. Suddenly she started and backed away from the water. For a moment I saw the whites of her frightened eyes. Quickly I sprang forward to calm her and fastened the reins about a stunted tree. She still shot uneasy glances towards the pool. My eyes followed hers. Close by the bank was what looked like an old sack bobbing up and down with the lapping of the waters. I looked again. After all, was it a sack? There was something about the shape of that curve which made me wonder whether it was air and water *alone* which caused this piece of fabric to move so rhythmically. I took a step towards the bank and leant forward. Not being able to reach without getting my feet wet, I broke off a stick from a nearby tree and started to pull the object to me. It was heavy and resistant. As it moved, something else came to the surface of the shallow water—something which made me drop my

To Rhodes 20 Miles
Grindle Meadow
To Lampson 46 Miles



Grindle Valley
X Marmoset's Body
□ Baines' Body

C.F. Willis

Darker Grows the Valley

stick in excitement. It was the dark back of a human head. Forgetting about wet feet, I waded in and clutched at the hair until, at last, sprawled on the bank, face downwards, lay the dead body of a man.

He was fully dressed, and his hands still dragged behind him in the water. Although exerting all my strength, I could not budge the body another inch. Involuntarily I looked down to discover the cause of the impediment and, as I did so, I saw something that made me think I must have returned to some primitive age of civilization where blood and iron ruled. Beneath the wrists there dangled chains. I pulled at them and the hands appeared. Each one was firmly clasped in a spring trap such as they set on the banks of streams for muskrats or minks. The body had been lying face down in about two feet of water, the hands manacled and helpless.

I lifted the drooping head and saw the face of a man freshly drowned; the bloated, purple skin, the staring eyes, the lips parted in a foolish, sagging smile. As I looked, the clock on the village church across the valley chimed eight times.

Jo Baines had kept his appointment.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEAVING the body where it lay, I grabbed Esmeralda's reins, jumped on her back and galloped home. The first thing I did was to telephone Bracegirdle. Then I dragged Toni out of bed, got out the car and, handing Esmeralda over to the astonished Lucinda, drove like mad back to the Mill Pool. Toni, who was too sleepy to take in what had happened, protested all the way.

"You and your bloody corpses," he kept muttering.

But as soon as he saw Baines sprawled on the bank of Grindle Creek he became alert.

"Looks as though he were drowned!" he exclaimed. "But, I don't see how he could—in that puddle."

He examined the swollen wrists, still held fast in the steel traps.

"I imagine the poor devil must have been trying to eke out his livelihood by catching muskrats and selling the hides."

"Yes, but——"

"Yes, but—exactly!" Toni paused and pulled

Darker Grows the Valley

at his dark chin. "And we are supposed to believe that he came here to examine his traps, slipped on the bank, caught his right hand in one and threshed about until he obligingly caught his left in another—and drowned. Doesn't quite gee, does it, Doug?"

"It certainly does not."

Toni had pulled back the wet hair from the dead man's forehead.

"Hey, I wouldn't touch anything until Bracegirdle comes."

"It looks," he reflected, "almost as if someone had tried to skin him first, poor devil. See that patch there—the outer layer of epidermis has completely gone."

My professional interest was now thoroughly aroused.

"Those are the kind of marks you'd get if you were dragged along behind some moving vehicle—say, a car."

Toni interrupted with a low whistle.

"You don't believe, Doug——"

"I've got to the stage when I'd believe anything. I wouldn't bet one penny on Polly Baines being alive now."

Bracegirdle arrived from Rhodes in record time. Toni and I were sitting together on the bank, smoking, when a car jolted to a stop and several men

Darker Grows the Valley

hurried out. For the next half-hour everything was very business-like. The coroner inspected the body and had it photographed from every possible angle. The bank was searched exhaustively for clues. When the district attorney arrived a little later, I told my story of the telephone call, the note, and the finding of the corpse. After that the coroner, whom we both knew, called Toni and me into a conference as to how long the man had been dead. None of us, however, were willing to hazard a guess, though from superficial observation it looked as though he had met his death by drowning.

"Well," remarked the coroner with a final glance at the corpse, "we'd better let Dr. Brooks have a look at him. He does our work on this kind of case."

"Mind if I come along?" Toni's voice was eager. "Brooks is a pal of mine."

"Glad to have you, Dr. Conti." The coroner buttoned up his coat. "Glad, I'm sure."

I turned to Bracegirdle, who was gazing abstractedly over the unruffled waters of the creek.

"The whole thing beats me," he said, his voice flat and toneless. "No motive, no clue, no rhyme, no reason. I've gone into the history of the Baines family in view of Polly's disappearance. There's nothing what you might call suspicious or off-colour about them. Poor, hard-working people. Baines

Darker Grows the Valley

has been Mr. Alstone's gardener for years. Never had a cent or a secret in his life." He broke off and turned to one of his men. "Hey, Bill, pull up them stakes and bring the traps along, too."

The two heavy spring traps, still attached to the dead man's wrists, were pulled out and the body was loaded into the undertaker's car, which had by this time arrived from Rhodes. Toni, haggard and unshaved, jumped up with the driver, and they all went off.

I returned to the house slowly, took a hot bath and ate a belated breakfast. The Baines affair was so inconsistent that I could not yet get it into proper perspective. I was tired of trying to puzzle everything out. Besides, there were definite things to do. As yet Toni and I were the only people in the neighbourhood to know of the latest tragedy. I must go and break the news to those most directly concerned.

Mark was working in the garden when I reached the Baineses' cottage. He listened to my story with stoical indifference, though his large, animal eyes never left my face while I was talking. When I had finished, he turned again to his flowers.

"I'd been looking for something of this sort," he muttered, "and there's more to come."

That was the only remark I could get out of him. Whether he was moved or unmoved at the news of

Darker Grows the Valley

his father's violent death it would have been impossible to tell.

A sister of Mrs. Baines had come over from Rhodes to keep house for her until the delivery was over. She was shocked and horrified at my tale, urging me to do all I could to keep the news from Minnie, "who was in a bad enough way already, poor critter, what with Polly bein' lost and the new one coming any minute now, God save us."

I did not see Mrs. Baines herself.

My next self-imposed task was to carry the news to Seymour Alstone. He was surprisingly decent about the whole business. The family certainly should not be turned out until suitable arrangements had been made. Baines's wages would be continued indefinitely. The old man's concern seemed genuine enough though a trifle laboured.

On the way home, an incident occurred which seemed almost like a humorous anti-climax to my shocking discovery of earlier in the morning. I happened to pass Bill Strong, an old man who lived in a dilapidated cottage near the Mill Pool, and who supported himself on about an acre of land and a little poultry. He was cranking up a T. Model Ford as I went by, and uttering a stream of language which would have done credit to an outspoken modern novelist—or to Roberta.

"Hello, Bill! What's up?"

Darker Grows the Valley

Almost incoherent with rage, the old man pointed a withered finger to a dead gosling which lay on the front seat.

"Found that there thrown up on the back porch this morning," he spluttered. "Takin' her in to the Sheriff, right now."

I murmured something foolish about a fox.

"Fox!" He spat disgustedly. "No fox killed that bird. You're a doc. Look at her yerself."

I peered into the car and saw that the bird's neck had been twisted round and round until it looked like a limp corkscrew.

"A pair of human hands done it," went on the old man. "I wouldn't mind so much if she'd been took and ate, but to find her just laying there grin-nin' at me—that riles me. I'll have the law on the asterisk bastard that done it just as sure as hell-fire."

As he drove off like the wrath of heaven, I did a simple feat of mental arithmetic.

- (1) Polly Baines.
- (2) Polly Baines's kitten.
- (3) Roberta's marmoset.
- (4) Jo Baines.
- (5) Bill Strong's goose.

Well, the *corpora delicti* in Grindle were certainly mounting up.

Darker Grows the Valley

On my arrival home I was greeted by Lucinda, who informed me in a stage whisper that Mrs. Middleton had just called to see me and was waiting in the living-room. I entered to find the trim little figure of Valerie's mother perched on Toni's stiffest ladder-back chair. She rose and approached me eagerly.

"You must pardon me, Dr. Swanson, for breaking in on you like this. But I have heard the most dreadful rumours. They tell me that Baines has been found dead—and that you discovered the corpse." Her round blue eyes scanned my face. "Of course, I could hardly believe it, but in this valley——"

I related what had happened, omitting to mention the fact that murder was suspected. Throughout my speech she stood gazing at me in horror.

"How terrible! How really terrible! And one of the most reliable men in the village, too." A malicious tone had crept into her usually mild voice. "But it's no wonder he should get killed that way. Trying to turn an honest penny by trapping muskrats just because Seymour paid him starvation wages! I think it is absolutely shameful!"

"I have just been talking to Mr. Alstone," I broke in hurriedly. "He is genuinely distressed and is being more than generous."

"Talk—more than generous!" Her little head was nodding violently. "Seymour is very glib with

Darker Grows the Valley

his tongue, but that poor widow will be out of her cottage and in the nearest gutter before Christmas. Mark my words, Dr. Swanson. Any man who can frighten his own son into divorcing his wife——! And he's done worse than that, if we only knew." She glanced at me darkly. "You remember all those tales that were going round the village not so long ago, tales of people who had seen a car riding over the country in the middle of the night—a car that was dragging something behind it? You remember all that, Dr. Swanson? Seymour was the first to see that they were suppressed. And why do you suppose he was so eager to stop people talking if there wasn't something behind it?"

I made some non-committal remark about village gossip, but Mrs. Middleton was far too excited to be put off.

"Ah, Dr. Swanson, you don't know Seymour like I do—and you haven't talked to the people whom he's threatened into silence. There are dreadful things going on in this valley," she continued inconsequentially. "My father lived here all his life, and, as a tiny girl, I remember him telling me there was an old saying: 'When the buzzards roost in Grindle Oak, death comes to the valley.' I have never seen so many buzzards in my life as I have this fall. I'm afraid for Valerie. If only we could afford to move!

Darker Grows the Valley

Polly Baines has gone and so has her father. I wonder which of us will be the next! ”

She left on this sinister note, apparently satisfied with the impression she had made. Of course, her accusations against Seymour verged on the fantastic. But it was curious that my theory about Baines having been dragged behind a car should have been thus corroborated. One might have thought that she had come on purpose to do so. . . .

Toni did not get back from the autopsy until two o'clock in the afternoon. Although accustomed to working on Sundays, he was absolutely all in and, refusing the enormous breakfast-lunch which Lucinda had prepared for him, went straight to bed. I did not see him again until about eleven o'clock that night, when he routed me out of the living-room and expressed a desire for fresh air.

Obediently I followed him into the lane. It was a cold night. The clouds were heavy and the moonlight shone across the countryside in fitful jagged patches.

We had not gone very far before I broached the subject of the autopsy.

“Did you get on all right?”

“Yes, Brooks was only too glad to have my help.” Toni's profile was suddenly illuminated as he lit his pipe. “It's a queer business, Doug. Baines was

Darker Grows the Valley

drowned all right. We made a microscopic examination of the particles in the air spaces and alveoli of the lungs. They were what you'd expect in anyone who'd been drowned in a muddy creek."

"When d'you think it happened?"

"Difficult to say exactly because the body had been in cold running water all night. We both agreed that he'd been dead for eight to ten hours when we saw him. Must have died between ten and twelve-thirty last night."

"Same old story. Almost anyone could have done it, eh?"

Toni grunted.

"But that's not all. The poor devil's body was just covered with abrasions. His clothes were almost in rags——"

"So he might have been dragged behind a car!"

"Looks that way." Toni's voice was deliberately flat and professional. "Whatever it was, he was alive when it happened. He was also alive when his two hands were fastened into those traps. Unconscious, perhaps, but alive. You could tell that from the bleeding and the state of the surrounding tissue."

"God! What a foul way to kill a person." Despite my seven years of medicine, I believe I shuddered.

Toni grunted again. He seemed to have lost

Darker Grows the Valley

interest in the conversation. For some minutes we walked in silence. At night the roads in Grindle are lonely, and we had not passed a soul since we left home. Even the covered bridge over the creek, where occasionally some of the villagers congregated, was deserted. We lingered there a moment, watching the sluggish water in the moonlight.

I remember thinking how silent it was, and, while the thought was in my mind, a sound broke the stillness. Toni gripped my arm and, as I followed his pointing finger, it seemed to me that a small, dark portion of the landscape had broken loose from its moorings and was moving slowly over the rising field towards the deserted road where the bloodhounds had lost the scent of Polly Baines. Silhouetted against the angry sky, I could see it was a car, jolting over the meadows, and without lights.

“Good God, did you hear that?”

Toni's grip on my arm had tightened. Something in his tone made the hairs on the back of my neck move upwards towards my hat.

“No, what was it?”

For a moment we stood and listened. The car was moving onward, slowly, relentlessly. Still, I could hear nothing but the faint throb of its engine. Then, it seemed, came another sound.

“There! Hear it?”

Darker Grows the Valley

Toni turned and stared at me, his face gleaming white in the darkness.

“Doug! It was the cry of an animal in pain—and it came from the back of that car!”

I shall never be quite certain whether or not I heard that cry, but, as Toni spoke, something seemed to snap in my brain like a cut tendon. I rushed forward and scrambled through a hedge, regardless of scratches and bruises. Then I broke into a steady run, the hard wintry soil scrunching beneath my feet. It was but a short distance to the top of the rise where, at least, I would be able to see in which direction the car was headed. Almost, it seemed, as I tore on, I was on the threshold of solution.

There were footsteps pounding at my side. Toni had followed me.

“Take it easy,” he cautioned. “If it’s the fellow we think it is he’s pretty tough. Remember Baines.”

I did not slacken my pace. The car had now disappeared off the receding edge of the field, but we were almost at the crest. In a minute we would be able to get a good view of the whole valley. I had, however, counted without the capricious moon, for, as we stood panting on the top of the incline, she passed sullenly and impenetrably behind a dark bank of cloud. We listened intently, but there was

Darker Grows the Valley

no sound except the usual noises of the night. An owl hooted and then from somewhere behind us came the uncanny laughter of a loon. In the distance we heard the reassuring toot of a train whistle. Otherwise the valley was as silent as a morgue.

We stood still a few moments listening to the sound of our beating hearts. Then, serene and silver, the moon emerged. But it was too late. The car—if car it really was—had vanished.

From our point of vantage, however, we could still tell something about the movements of our neighbours. There was the Alstones' house in the distance, with one light twinkling in an upper window; the Goschens' place bathed in darkness; a porch light only at the Tailford-Joneses'; and a bedroom window at the Middletons'. These pin-pricks of illumination stabbed the distant darkness. Only the Baines's cottage was bright. That was lit up like a casino.

I was about to remark on this to Toni when I noticed he had turned away and was staring through some bushes into the little wood where the dead body of Roberta's monkey had been found. He held up his hand in warning as I approached. With him I peered through the hedge.

On the edge of the disused road, parked and without lights, was a large, expensive-looking car.

Darker Grows the Valley

I was in the act of pushing my way through to investigate when I heard something which made me pause. There was a woman inside that car and she was talking eagerly, shrilly.

"No, I won't do it . . ."

A man said something, but his tone was too low for us to catch. Again the woman spoke.

"He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him. He's jealous, vindictive . . ."

In the moonlight I could see a grim smile twitching around the corners of Toni's mouth.

"You know what'll happen if you don't . . . You're a jelly-fish, a goddam, spineless jelly-fish!"

Toni was laughing softly.

"Recognize the voice?" he whispered.

"Roberta?"

"Yes, our local Messalina!"

"She's mad at someone."

"Oh, just a lover's quarrel."

"Doesn't sound much like love."

"If you knew life and Roberta as well as I do, you'd realize that she never bawls 'em out until after she's through with them. Then she eats 'em alive—like the female spider."

The woman's voice was lifted once more.

"Of course he's crazy. That's what makes him so dangerous!"

Toni was pulling me away.

Darker Grows the Valley

"I've had enough eavesdropping for to-night," he said gruffly. "The number of the car is RX819, so if you want to find out who the owner is, all you have to do is to keep your eyes open."

He seemed to be annoyed about something.

It was after one o'clock when we descended the hill and made our way homeward. It would have been reasonable to suppose that our adventures were over for the night, but, just as we were scrambling on to the road, a car dashed past in the direction of the Baines's cottage. We followed it round a bend and saw Mark turning into the broken shed which served him as a garage. Outside the cottage stood another car. The lights were on, and I noticed at once that it was not the one we had just left.

"Midnight automobile show," I commented stupidly.

"I believe that's Thomson's car," Toni exclaimed. "Must have been a rush call. If that baby's coming he'll probably need some help."

And help was exactly what our excellent colleague, Dr. Josiah Thomson, did need at that moment. In fact, I never saw a man so glad to see two human beings in all my life.

Quickly we sterilized our hands and borrowed clean aprons. I had not helped at a lying-in since my interne days, and had almost forgotten what an

Darker Grows the Valley

intricate business it was. In the final stages I was appointed anæsthetist while Thomson and Toni juggled perilously with life and death. If it had not been for Toni, Mrs. Baines would almost certainly have joined her husband.

At length the child was delivered, a shrivelled, premature creature which opened its eyes once, and for a brief moment there was another cry in the night—weak and wailing. But the thread of life had snapped.

At last we sent Mark down to the kitchen to make us some coffee while Thomson went off to 'phone for an ambulance. He wanted to get the mother into hospital as quickly as possible.

Over the dark hills the sun was peeping at Grindle Valley when we finally started homeward. A new day had begun already.

And already it had brought forth Seymour Alstone, the earliest riser in the neighbourhood. He was driving round the estate on his morning tour of inspection. When he saw us, he drew up his car and we gave him the news of Mrs. Baines.

"Good thing," he snapped, when he heard that the baby was dead. "One less mouth to feed. How's the mother?"

"Bad way," replied Toni grimly.

"Well, she should have gone to hospital."

Darker Grows the Valley

"The baby came a bit early—but she's gone now."

Seymour gave us a disapproving nod and started his engine. Then he seemed to think better of it, for he switched off the ignition.

"Probably doesn't mean anything," he said, "but I stopped by the kennels just now and found one of my dogs missing. Trainer—the best setter I've got. You haven't seen him about anywhere, I suppose?"

Toni and I looked at each other swiftly, then shook our heads in unison.

"Well, you might keep your eyes open."

Mr. Alstone drove on. Toni was standing in the middle of the road, staring after the car in utter amazement. Then, clearly and distinctly, he exclaimed:

"I—just—simply—don't—believe it."

He became convulsed with almost hysterical mirth.

"Good God!" he gasped, "and she called *him* a spineless jellyfish!"

I followed his shaking finger as it pointed after the fast-disappearing automobile. Then I saw what it was that so amazed and amused him.

The number of Seymour Alstone's car was RX819.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN recording these events as they occurred in chronological order, I have tried to observe the accurate and impersonal precision of an article for the medical press. I have been truthful and—as far as facts and memory serve—exact. But it has been impossible for me to give more than the impressions of a single clinical observer. Had Bracegirdle narrated these same events he could doubtless have filled pages dealing with his findings and deductions. In fact, I feel reasonably sure that he could have made of them a very creditable attempt at a detective story. Coming from me, however, this record can never be more than an incoherent and rather loosely knit mystery. I claim no inside knowledge, no startling theories. The affair, as it unfolded, baffled me just as completely as it baffled everyone else, including the police.

I wish I could pay sufficient tribute to Bracegirdle for the hours of work that he and his subordinates must have put in to find—precisely nothing. All I can say is that, in their efforts to discover Polly

Darker Grows the Valley

Baines, they literally did not leave a stone unturned in Grindle, and they followed every possible clue that might lead to the murderer of her father. The crimes had been committed with all the apparent nonchalance of an unreasoning maniac. Yet, when Bracegirdle came to analyse the surrounding circumstances, he found himself up against an uncanny premeditation and cunning which argued a remarkably high level of intelligence on the part of the killer—and, incidentally, a profound knowledge of the habits of the neighbourhood.

It was not that information was lacking. Everyone in the countryside was ready to step forward and tell some fantastic story about strange things that they had seen or heard. The agonized cries of animals and children might have been supposed to make the night hideous in Grindle. The normal depredations of foxes, skunks and hawks were inevitably put down to criminal, even supernatural agency.

As for the supernatural element, there were many who firmly believed that the Devil himself was at large. Strange portents were bruited about on all sides. An abnormal number of buzzards in the neighbourhood argued more and more disaster. Mrs. Baines was popularly supposed to have given birth to an unspeakable monster on the night following her husband's death.

Darker Grows the Valley

These rumours had tangible effects on various people. All those who were in any way strange were regarded with odium and distrust. Poor Mark was discharged by all his employers excepting the Middletons and ourselves. Millie, in a moment of panic, fired her excellent Japanese waiter without notice and served such bad cocktails in consequence that the Goschens themselves came to be regarded as having sinister intentions towards their guests. The shell-shock and other regrettable accidents which Edgar Tailford-Jones had suffered in the war, became exaggerated to psychotic proportions. God alone knows what was said about Toni and me, but nothing and no one was entirely free from suspicion.

On Wednesday I attended the inquest on Baines—a drab, gloomy affair without a ray of light or interest to liven up the proceedings. What little evidence there was pointed definitely towards murder, though it was admitted as possible that his death might have been the result of some hideous accident. For a man of sober habit, however, such a form of death would have been undoubtedly both difficult and improbable. The verdict was deferred pending further investigations.

Now that there were no longer any intriguing medical aspects to the case, Toni promptly lost interest and returned to his rats and guinea-pigs at

Darker Grows the Valley

Rhodes. I, too, showed admirable callousness and, in my free time, continued my riding, hunting and shooting as before. Social activities increased in proportion to the general uneasiness, and everyone showed that gregariousness which, following upon calamity, is a sure sign of frayed nerves and disquieted minds. Hardly an evening passed when we did not pay or receive visits, but nothing of any real importance occurred until the Saturday evening following the death of Baines. And this incident will always be fixed in my mind as one of the most astonishing and inexplicable in the whole affair.

The disappearance of Polly had left me comparatively cold. My discovery of Baines's body was unpleasantly gruesome, but to a doctor it was all in the day's work. The next outrage, however, was so utterly illogical that, even now, I feel a kind of frustrated rage and disgust when I think about it. But then, of course, it happened under my very nose, as it were. Besides, Valerie was involved.

On Saturday night Toni and I were invited to the Middletons'. It was, Valerie announced, to be a non-Baines party, similar to the non-stock-market parties so frequent in 1929, where any reference to recent calamities was frowned upon as a serious breach of etiquette.

Throughout dinner even Mrs. Middleton observed

Darker Grows the Valley

the rules with unexpected propriety. We all talked and acted like civilized people who had never had even a nodding acquaintance with battle, murder or sudden death. Sancho Panza, too, was on his best behaviour, and did not bark once until he had emptied his supper bowl and politely asked for someone to open the door so that he might answer the calls of nature.

Soon afterwards the Goschens arrived and everyone forgot about Sancho Panza. Charlie had brought a quart of rye and we mixed drinks and started to get as raucous as was possible under the pessimistic eye of Mrs. Middleton.

It must have been about half an hour after their arrival that the first extraordinary incident occurred.

“Where’s Sancho, Valerie?” Millie’s eyes darted about the room. “Don’t say that anything——” She broke off, remembering the rules of the evening.

There was a little lull in the conversation, and the room seemed strangely still. It was just one of those moments which often occur in the most convivial gatherings, when all animation is suspended for the moment, as if everyone were watching and waiting for somebody else to speak.

Then, without warning, the quiet air of the Middletons’ living-room was rent by a woman’s shriek. We all looked at once towards Mrs.

Darker Grows the Valley

Middleton, who was sitting by the fire, her face contorted into a strange expression of alarm and surprise. Her hand was pointing shakily towards the farthest window.

“God! Did you see it?”

Even as she spoke I saw it, too, though it had disappeared in a flash. A face pressed against the window-pane; a face seemingly without features; an inhuman face in which nothing was recognizable except a fleeting impression of maniacal rage and hatred.

Millie Goschen had upset her drink and was staring at the window in open-mouthed horror. But I had no time to take in further details. Toni had snatched a flash-light from the mantelpiece and was striding across the room.

“I’ll go,” he exclaimed. “No, you stay here, Doug.”

He slammed the door and was gone.

No one spoke while he was out of the room. Solemnly I went round and pulled all the shades whilst the practical Charlie poured everyone a stiff drink. I do not know how long Toni was gone, but before he returned I distinctly remember hearing a car start. It seemed as though he was away for an hour, but it was probably less than ten minutes.

At length he stood in the doorway blinking at

Darker Grows the Valley

the lights. His complexion, normally olive-brown, was grey. In his arms he held the body of a dog. At first no one would have dreamed that it was Sancho Panza, whose white, well-groomed coat had always been Valerie's pride and delight. This animal was ragged, limp and dirty. Across its belly there was an ugly brown stain which was darker than the other marks on its matted hair.

White to the lips, Valerie ran forward.

"It isn't——! Oh, my God!"

As she spoke I noticed something which Toni was evidently trying to conceal. Tied tightly around the dog's back legs was a piece of cord about a foot long. The end was frayed as though it had been hacked off with a blunt knife.

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes." Toni's eyes met Valerie's in a look of understanding and sympathy. "Let's take him out into the kitchen. Maybe Doug and I can do something. Put on a kettle, quick. We'll need some hot water." The dog gave a little whine of pain and struggled in Toni's arms. "Oh, Charlie, you might go round to our place and get my emergency kit. It's a black bag and you'll find it in my bedroom. Here's the key."

Charlie was off like a bullet. Then, with admirable calm, Valerie led us into the back kitchen, got rags and hot water, and pulled out the enamel-

Darker Grows the Valley

topped table. It was only when she saw the piece of cord that she showed any symptoms of breaking down. Once again her eyes met Toni's.

"If anyone did this on purpose," she said slowly, "I think I shall kill him—myself."

"Don't worry, my dear. I'll do it for you." Toni patted her arm and smiled. "Now—go and get yourself a good strong drink. It's going to be all right."

Sancho Panza was a sad spectacle. His hind legs were broken, and there were large patches of bare skin where the hair had been rubbed off in nasty abrasions. He was quite conscious and obviously in great pain, for as we washed his wounds he kept whining and turning towards us reproachful brown eyes. There was not much we could do until Charlie got back.

"Was there anyone there?" I asked at length. "That face at the window——?"

Toni shot me a swift look. "Only the dog," he said quietly.

Somehow I felt that he was not speaking the truth.

"But I thought I heard the engine of an automobile while you were out."

Toni grunted.

"Well, it looks to me as though Sancho had been dragged behind a car—like Baines."

Darker Grows the Valley

“If I were you I’d keep my mouth shut—at *any* rate for the present——”

Toni broke off as Charlie Goschen came in with his bag, and we were now able to relieve the creature’s pain by an injection of morphine. This enabled us to work with greater freedom, though it took us nearly an hour to sterilize the wounds and set the legs in roughly constructed splints.

Just as we were tidying up, I became conscious of a curious sound which came in from the open windows. As if in sympathy with Sancho Panza, it seemed that all the dogs in the valley had started to bark. First of all came the deep-throated bay-ing of the Grindle hounds; then Mr. Alstone’s hunting dogs started; after a bit, we could hear the whining and barking of almost every dog in the neighbourhood. The chorus swelled to open diapason. I went across and shut the window.

We had done all we could for Sancho. Toni gave his final instructions to Valerie when we rejoined the others in the living-room.

“Keep him warm to-night and have the vet. in to-morrow. I think he’ll live, but”—he paused and smiled—“he may be a dot and carry one for a while.”

Valerie’s eyes looked their gratitude to us both. It was obvious that she could not trust herself to

Darker Grows the Valley

speaking. Immediately she set about fixing us some drinks.

The others were eager with their questions as to exactly what had happened to Toni when he left the room. Had he seen anyone? Had there been a car?

Toni replied curtly that he had found Sancho Panza lying by the side of the road, but it was too dark to see anything else. From his tone it was obvious that he did not wish to talk, and he was not the kind of person whom anyone cared to question after he had made up his mind to silence.

"I think I'd better be getting home to see that the kids are all right," said Millie at length. "Those noises give me the creeps."

"Wonder what's biting 'em?" Charlie had gone to the front door.

As he opened it the wailing of the dogs sounded wilder than before. Grindle Valley seemed to be in a state of tumult.

"A sign of death!" said Mrs. Middleton quietly.

Valerie had gone down into the cellar to make a bed near the furnace for Sancho Panza. No one spoke for a moment.

Suddenly Charlie came running back into the room. The expression on his face was a mixture of alarm and impish glee.

"Hey, folks, come quick. I believe Seymour's

Darker Grows the Valley

house is on fire. It's light enough to read by out there, and the glare comes from over his way."

Regardless of the night air, we all crowded to the front door. We knew immediately why the dogs had been barking, for the breezes brought the acrid smell of smoke to our nostrils, and there was a weird illumination in the sky. Millie, fearful for her own property, had run up a nearby incline which commanded a view of the valley, and, without bothering about hats or coats, we all followed her.

From our elevation we saw at once that it was not Seymour's home that was on fire, but a large barn standing some three hundred yards from the house itself. One end of it was well ablaze, and the flames leapt skyward in gorgeous spirals of colour.

"He's got two thousand dollars' worth of alfalfa in that barn," commented Millie dryly.

Charlie, who was rather stout, had not kept up with the rest of us. When he reached the top of the slope, I noticed that the expression on his face had changed to one of genuine concern.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's the barn, and Franklin told me to-day that his father had just put his two hunters in there while the stables were being repaired."

It was obvious that Charlie was far more upset by the danger to the horses than he would have been

Darker Grows the Valley

if Alstone's house had been burnt down with all its inmates.

"Come on, let's go and see if we can help."

Toni shepherded all of us (with the exception of Mrs. Middleton) into cars, and in a few minutes we were tearing up Seymour Alstone's drive and round to the barn which lay behind the house.

As we turned the corner by the gun-room, it was like passing from the wings of a theatre on to a brilliantly lit stage. The whole scene—even the sky—was blood red. Quite a number of villagers had collected, and their shadows fell like weird symbols across the strip of grass in front of us. Everyone was shouting, yet it was difficult to catch an intelligible word. The heat was considerable. I can remember the heavy beads of sweat which gleamed on the foreheads of the people I jostled against in my anxiety to get closer.

In the past I had never taken any particular notice of the barn, except as just another manifestation of Seymour's opulence. He had constructed it several years previously, when, defying the scriptural warning, he had pulled down the original erection to build greater. It was built on a foundation of brick with a superstructure of frame. Already most of the woodwork on the right-hand side was well alight, and, every now and then, above the roaring of the flames and the shouts of

Darker Grows the Valley

the onlookers, I could hear the dull crash as the dislodged bricks and rafters tumbled to the ground below. The other side was still intact, though almost obscured by the spark-laden smoke from the burning alfalfa. Fortunately the wind was blowing away from the house, otherwise it would have been impossible to approach from that quarter.

The Rhodes fire-brigade had not yet arrived. A long chain of people were valiantly passing buckets down from the house. Among them I recognized several familiar faces—one of Alstone's coloured kitchen-maids; Hall, the thin, dignified butler; even old Bill Strong from the village. The whole neighbourhood seemed to have turned out for the occasion, and were rallying around Seymour in his hour of trouble. Their efforts at fire-fighting were pretty futile, but I knew Alstone well enough to realize that he would go on struggling even after all reasonable hope of extinguishing the blaze had been abandoned.

"The horses are still inside. Isn't it awful?" I turned at the sound of Millie's voice in my ear. "Old Seymour's hoping for a chance to get in and shoot them. He *has* got some decent feelings after all."

She pulled at my arm, and together we hurried across to where Alstone stood with a revolver in his

Darker Grows the Valley

hand. He did not take the slightest notice of our offers of help. I believe he did not even know we were there. Every now and then a servant would run up, and clearly, abruptly, he would give an order. There was something splendid about him. He reminded me of a general in absolute command. His rugged features, somehow strengthened and hardened by the firelight, seemed to typify Authority. Yet there was another and softer expression on his face. For the first time I realized that pity did have a place in his composition—pity which he had never shown to his own flesh and blood, but which sprang suddenly up in him now that his horses were in danger.

“Do you know,” Millie whispered in my ear, “I can’t help feeling a little sorry for the old son of a gun. Isn’t there something we can do? It’s so feeble standing around and gaping.”

“We might get a bucket,” I suggested flippantly.

As a matter of fact, spitting would have been almost as effective.

At that moment the wind must have veered, for suddenly Millie was completely blotted out from view, and I found myself half smothered in a cloud of pungent smoke. I spluttered and rubbed my eyes. Near by I could hear Seymour shouting something, and then, as though in answer to his voice, came one of the most dreadful noises I have

Darker Grows the Valley

ever heard—agonized and almost human. It was the whinnying of the two frightened horses.

I hurried forward in Seymour's direction. Still unable to see an inch in front of me, I could hear voices in rapid conversation. One of them was Toni's.

"You've got to let me try and make it, sir. Don't you see, it's the only chance we have to save them?"

Seymour's reply came quiet and authoritative.

"I tell you the horses are not yet in any real danger. Their stalls are at the back and well protected. It would be madness to risk a human life in all this smoke and flame. I thank you, Dr. Conti, but I must forbid you to disobey me."

I heard no more, for at that moment the smoke cleared, swerving fanwise towards the creek. I blinked and stared around me. A few feet away, their faces vivid and strangely tense, stood Toni and Valerie. They were gazing at the barn, and Valerie had her hand on the tweed of his coat.

"No, Toni, you mustn't. Even Uncle Seymour says it's madness."

He pushed her hand away and made a move forward.

"Toni, you darned fool!" I shouted. "Those horses are beyond hope."

But I was wrong, for, honking furiously, an automobile had crashed over the grass and was grinding

Darker Grows the Valley

to a stop within a few crazy feet of the barn. Everyone crowded round obscuring my vision, but I had caught a glimpse of Peter Foote jumping out. He shouted something, apparently asking a question, and before anyone could stop him, he was dashing towards the fire.

“Come back! Come back at once!” Seymour’s voice boomed loud but somehow futile over the babel of cries that followed the boy.

Peter ran on. For some moments he stood at the door, fumbling with the catch. Then, wrenching the fastening loose, he swung it back and disappeared from sight. Behind him the smoke bellied out like a sail in a high breeze. With the smoke, too, came the sound of horses, louder now and wilder.

The barn, as though resenting human intrusion, was burning even more furiously. While we watched, the far side of the roof collapsed with a hollow crash and a great geyser of sparks spouted up into the smoke-thickened air. We waited, but there was no sign of the boy. Once more the horses cried out, and we heard the stamping of hoofs. Then there was silence.

Silence, too, fell on the crowd, and in the lull I heard a voice strangely weak and soft after the din to which my ears had grown accustomed.

“Dr. Swanson! Dr. Swanson! We must do something. Peter’s gone in there. He’s most likely

Darker Grows the Valley

burning to death." It was Gerald Alstone standing at my side, his cheeks deathly white. "Don't you realize? He's in there! What shall we do?"

I noticed Seymour eyeing him angrily.

"The fool, the little fool!" he was muttering.

One could not tell from the old man's voice whether he referred to Peter or to his grandson, who had completely given way and was sobbing hysterically against Valerie's shoulder.

Although it was only a matter of seconds since Peter had disappeared, the crowd was already beginning to get anxious. Even the fire-fighters had paused in their work and were staring eagerly at the barn, the buckets idle in their hands. At this point, however, a vague figure detached itself from the fringe of onlookers and slipped unostentatiously towards the gaping doorway.

"Did you see that?" I shouted to Millie, who had returned and was standing by my side. "Someone's gone in after him."

A few seconds later everyone tautened, and the vague shouting dwindled to an excited murmur as the figure re-emerged, calm and unhurried. Behind him lumbered two larger forms—the horses. As though accustoming their blinded eyes to the change in illumination, they all three paused. Then they moved towards Seymour. The beasts seemed to

Darker Grows the Valley

have absolute confidence in the man who had saved them. They walked gently, their heads bent downward, their tails swishing. As the figure approached Alstone and thrust the halters into his hand, the whole crowd found its breath and shouted:

“Mark Baines!”

Before we had time to realize what had happened, however, Mark had dashed back into the barn. Meanwhile the horses, sensing the fact that he had left them, seemed to go crazy. They both reared and whinnied, doing their utmost to follow him back into the burning building. Seymour fought like mad to hold them down, and, forgetting everything else, I rushed to his aid, clinging with him to the broken halters. At last we managed to get them under some sort of control.

When next I was able to look at the barn, Mark was once more appearing through the smoke. This time he carried something thrown over his shoulder. I realized then how incredibly strong he must have been. The body of Peter Foote seemed to have no more weight than that of a baby.

Once more he came up to Seymour, while the crowd surged round him, and then, dropping the body almost roughly at his feet, he disappeared before anyone had time even to applaud his heroism.

Toni and I pushed forward and began an examination of Peter. As we did so I heard Seymour order-

Darker Grows the Valley

ing someone to lead away the horses and bring up a car.

The boy was unconscious. His hair was pretty badly singed and his face was blackened with smoke. Otherwise he seemed to have received no damage from the actual fire. His left shin-bone, however, was fractured.

"One of the horses must have kicked him," I muttered. "He might have lain there for ever if it hadn't been for Mark."

Throughout our examination, I could hear Gerald's heavy breathing close to my ear, and when we were finished, he pleaded to be taken with Peter to the hospital.

Toni grunted and indicated the car.

By now the barn was hopelessly ablaze, but everyone seemed to have lost interest. Even Seymour was returning to the house muttering something about insurance. After Toni had gone off with Peter, I turned to Valerie and offered to drive her home.

She shook her head, smiling faintly.

"No, I'll be all right. Was Peter badly hurt?"

"Only a broken leg. I'm more worried about Mark."

"Let's go and find him together." In the glare from the burning barn I could see her eyes shining.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ I think it was one of the bravest things I have ever seen.”

A little stab of envy passed through me, and I wished that it had been I who had won Valerie's praise by thus risking my life.

“ Good old Mark! ” I muttered as we started towards the Baines's cottage. “ Just like him to save the horses first! ”

CHAPTER SIX

“It will soon be just a simple process of elimination.” Bracegirdle was puffing at his pipe in my office at Rhodes a few days after the burning of Seymour’s barn.

“You mean that if he goes on long enough you’ll eventually get alibis for everyone else?”

The deputy nodded.

“Yes. That’s the way I’m working now. Just on the alibis.”

“Then you’re presuming that one person is responsible for everything?”

“I can’t see any other way to figure it, Dr. Swanson. Of course, he’s as crazy as a coot—and cunning as a fox—but even a crazy person can’t be in two places at once.”

“A case of ‘never mind the character and stick to the alleyby, Samivel.’ ”

Bracegirdle smiled and opened his note-book.

“Now here,” he began, “is a list of the possibles in Grindle Valley.”

Darker Grows the Valley

I noticed with amusement that Toni, Valerie and myself were down with the rest.

"As I told you before," he continued, "no one really had an alibi for the time Polly Baines disappeared because no one knows exactly when it happened. The same applies to Baines. He may have been killed while you were playing bridge at Mr. Alstone's, in which case we could rule out Miss Middleton, Franklin, Seymour and yourself. But unfortunately, the medical evidence is not exact as to the time of death, and it may have happened *after* you left. Then your alibis are in most cases only supported by the statement of one other person."

"I see."

"As for Mrs. Tailford-Jones's marmoset and Bill Strong's goose, we're not going to get much from them except corroborative evidence. They prove, if we need any proof, that these murders are the work of a crazy person."

"And Mr. Alstone's setter?" I put in suddenly.
"Still no news of that?"

Bracegirdle's face darkened. "I was going to keep that matter to myself. There's enough uneasiness in the valley already without adding to it. However, I might as well tell you. One of my men found it yesterday."

"Dead?"

Darker Grows the Valley

He nodded.

“The same old way?”

“Yes, the same old way. Mr. Alstone has been informed. We can do no more.” He cleared his throat and smiled wearily. “Now, with regard to Miss Middleton’s dog; we can rule out Mrs. Middleton, Miss Valerie and yourself.”

“And Dr. Conti and the Goschens, surely?”

Bracegirdle did not reply for a moment. He was busy relighting his pipe.

“We—ll, I’m not so sure. Mind you, I’m not suggesting anything, but if we’re to do this thing right, we’ve got to note down every possibility. My understanding is that the dog was already outside at the time of the Goschens’ arrival. And Dr. Conti went out *alone* to find it. He was gone for some time.”

I grinned.

“Very pretty! But you’ve forgotten the high spot—the face at the window. We were *all* in the room when we saw that.”

“No, I haven’t forgotten the face at the window, but you can’t depend on things like that. You see, any face, even your own mother’s, can look unrecognizable and horrible when it’s pressed against a pane and seen from inside a lighted room. It might have been the murderer, but there again it might just have been one of the neighbours having

Darker Grows the Valley

a peek in. You know how things are in the valley—everybody on edge and inquisitive.”

“You’re not taking any chances, are you, Bracegirdle?”

“Can’t afford to. Now, when it comes to the barn, things get a bit easier. You see, we’re almost certain that someone set fire to it because several large cans of kerosene were missing from Alstone’s cellar. And we can also make a pretty good guess that it was done while you were all at the Middletons’.”

“So that gives an alibi for the Goschens, the Middletons, Dr. Conti and me.”

He nodded.

“Yes, and also to young Gerald Alstone and his friend, Peter Foote. Their car broke down on the Lampson road and it took over an hour to fix. I’ve seen the mechanic at the garage. That’s why they arrived so late for the fire.”

“How about the others?”

“Well, the old man was in the house, so he said. But it’s hardly likely he’d fire his own barn, unless, of course, it was for the insurance. Franklin was working in his outside carpenter’s shop, but no one saw him go in or come out. Mrs. Tailford-Jones was at home, so she says, and the Colonel had motored to Lampson. I can’t check up yet on either of them, though I do know that Mrs. Tailford-

Darker Grows the Valley

Jones took the roadster out some time during the evening and she was seen to enter the Alstones' drive. But she didn't call at the house."

"I can't see Roberta spoiling her fine clothes with cans of kerosene! "

"I can see that woman doing anything." Bracegirdle's honest blue eyes opened wider and then narrowed. "What do you make of her? "

"Oh, she's just a small-time gold-digger who had the bad luck to select an—er—inadequate mate."

"How d'you mean—inadequate? "

"War-wounds mostly, poor devil. He was blown up at Belleau Wood and lost his matrimonial prospects. And then he lost all his money in '29. The first was bad enough for Roberta, but the second was a real tragedy."

"Well, you have got some queer people living in Grindle. Take Franklin Alstone——"

"Oh, he's the victim of another misalliance. He married a girl in a drug-store when he was quite a kid, and his father made him divorce her because there was insanity in her family. At least, that's the excuse Seymour made. She still lives in Lampson and her reputation's none too sweet."

For a few moments Bracegirdle smoked reflectively without speaking. At length he came out with:

"I don't want to sound insulting, Dr. Swanson,

Darker Grows the Valley

but from an ordinary citizen's viewpoint I'd say that you and Miss Middleton are about the only two people in the neighbourhood you could describe as really sane and normal."

I laughed.

"Come, Bracegirdle, it's not so bad as all that!"

"Well," he persisted, "would you, as a doctor, be willing to take the stand and certify to the sanity of the others?"

"I'm not an alienist, but, if I were, I certainly wouldn't describe any of them as homicidal lunatics."

"None the less, someone has committed a series of outrages. That someone is a living human being. All we can hope for is that eventually we shall get him by eliminating everyone else."

I smiled a trifle grimly.

"If he goes on much longer there won't be any of us left to eliminate."

"That's where you hit the nail on the head, Dr. Swanson. There's real danger at present in Grindle—not only for the livestock and pets but for the inhabitants, too. I can't get Mr. Alstone to realize it. He pooh-poohs all my suggestions and tries to act as though nothing unusual has happened."

"Yes, he's being a regular Pollyanna. All is for the best in this best of all possible valleys. You know, of course, that he's giving a big supper-party

Darker Grows the Valley

on Saturday, to be followed by his yearly coon-hunt? ”

Bracegirdle remarked that he had not heard about it.

“ Well, everyone’s going, but we’re all profoundly shocked—or pretend to be. It’s an annual event and this year, I suppose, Seymour is particularly anxious to prove that he’s in love and charity with everyone—except the coons! Bad taste, of course, but we don’t argue with the decrees of Seymour. Besides, he provides such excellent food. Last year it was lobster newburg! ”

I went home shortly after Bracegirdle had left. On my way I called in to see Mark. He had been pretty badly burned on the right arm and thigh by a falling rafter, and there were other abrasions on his body which he seemed unwilling to explain. After terrifying threats of sepsis and gangrene, I had persuaded him to spend a few days in bed.

It was almost dark when I climbed up to his greenhouse bedroom. The invisible flowers greeted me with a great wave of scent. It was like walking into a perfume store where all the bottles had been smashed. In the obscurity I could make out the vague form of a table piled high with bunches of grapes and unopened cartons of cigarettes. They were, I supposed, inadequate tributes to his heroism from the neighbours. But the hero himself was

Darker Grows the Valley

not there. The bed was empty and the long attic deserted. Feeling considerably irritated with my patient, I descended to the ground floor.

Just as I was threading my way through the cages of foxes, skunks and other vermin, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Mark was stepping across the threshold, and in his hand he had something which I could just make out as a watering-can.

"Well, Mark," I began in the stern voice of a family physician. "What have you to say for yourself?"

He came up to me, his eyes seeming to gleam in the darkness like an owl's.

"I've been takin' it easy, Doc, like you told me."

"But you're not taking it easy now. You might get those burns infected if you don't take care."

"It's for them flowers," he said resentfully. "They've a right to live just as much as you or me."

He pushed past and began to swing himself up the ladder. I followed to the upper room.

"Well, Mark, you can get on with your watering when I'm through. I want to dress that arm."

Reluctantly he put down the watering-can and, pulling off his shirt, lay on the bed. I lit the three candles that stood on the table.

"I see everyone's been sending you presents," I

Darker Grows the Valley

began fatuously, as I produced bandages and lint. "If it hadn't been for you——"

He turned to me, the candlelight throwing queer shadows across his face.

"Them were beautiful horses, Dr. Swanson. I didn't know they were in that barn. Some days I used to feed 'em when the stableman was away."

"I saw Peter Foote at the hospital to-day," I remarked. "He'll be in bed for at least two weeks. He asked me to tell you how grateful he was."

Mark did not reply. I must have been hurting him more than I thought, for just then I caught a glimpse of his face. It was contorted with pain, and, try as I would, I could not get another word from him.

When I left, he was sprinkling water over his beloved flowers.

On the following day, the weather, which had been exceptionally warm, began to show signs of breaking up. By Saturday, the night for which the coon-hunt had been scheduled, there was a definite hint of snow in the air. All day the sky had been a jaundiced yellow, and by four o'clock in the afternoon, it was almost as dark as night.

I had been kept later than Toni at the hospital and by the time I got home he was dressed in breeches and leather jacket, ready for the fray. He

Darker Grows the Valley

was pale and moody, as he had been ever since the accident to Valerie's dog. He seemed to have taken it very hard. Even now that Sancho was well on the way to recovery, my friend persisted in his refusal to discuss the matter.

To my surprise, he held in his hand a wing of chicken, which he was eating with a hunk of bread.

"'Fraid you won't get enough to eat?" I commented.

He looked at me a moment as though he were about to say something. Then he turned away.

"I'm not going there to eat," he said dryly. "Incidentally, you'll be late if you don't hurry up and get ready. I'm taking Valerie in my car."

I was, apparently, the last to arrive at the Alstones'. Practically all the automobiles in the neighbourhood were drawn up outside the front door. I had to go right round the house and down a little side-drive that ran behind the stable before I could find room to park. Even here there was another car standing close up against the stable wall. As I switched off the ignition and stepped out, I noticed idly that it was Toni's. He and Valerie must have taken their time driving up from the Middletons'.

It was a most pretentious party. Old Alstone had spread himself. The enormous reception-room was a blaze of lights, and there seemed to be servants

Darker Grows the Valley

everywhere handing round exotic dishes. The greater part of the guests were clustered about the buffet at the far end of the room, their rough hunting costumes curiously out of place amongst all this heavy splendour. Every one of our friends was there, except, of course, Peter Foote, who was still in hospital, and Mrs. Middleton, who had kept with surprising meticulousness her vow never again to darken the door of her brother-in-law.

Franklin was scurrying about, looking rather apologetic and pressing people to glasses of lemon- and orangeade. Roberta, noble but a trifle overstuffed in a new pair of riding-breeches, was making hay with a group of young men whom I recognized as medical students from Gerald's class at the university. Seymour, of course, was much in evidence. He strolled around the room being polite, yet preserving his usual harsh aloofness.

I saw him bearing down on me, and, feeling incapable of coping with him on an empty stomach, I hurried to the buffet in search of refreshment and Valerie. On my way I bumped into Edgar Tailford-Jones, who was taking little rabbit bites at a sandwich and throwing glances at his wife. He started to say something, but at that moment I spotted Valerie and, smiling vaguely, left him once more alone with his thoughts and his sandwich.

“Hello, Doug, do have one of these squabs!”

Darker Grows the Valley

Valerie was smiling at me and holding out a plate.

"What a feast!" I remarked.

"Yes, I'm making an absolute pig of myself."

"Where's Toni?"

She looked up at me, her blue eyes serious.

"I don't know. I've hardly seen him since we got here. I don't think he's well."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Gone on a hunger strike. I did a real Circe act tempting him, but he just shrugged his shoulders and walked away."

I was about to reply when the Goschens came up, Millie ravenous and full of scandal, Charlie red-faced and racy.

"My dear!" said Millie, grabbing at random among the dishes. "Have you ever seen anything so awful as Roberta? She looks like the winning of Barbara Worth."

"All the same, she's making a big hit with the boys," put in Charlie, grinning. "I'd like to see you get away with it at her age."

"Medical students!" snorted Millie. "When I get to her age even I will be able to make a medical student. They see nothing year in year out but a few angular nurses—all elbows and antiseptic."

We went on chatting and eating, yet in spite of the glitter and gaiety, the party lacked something. I suppose that was only to be expected, for the germ

Darker Grows the Valley

of suspicion had taken root among us. We all felt that somewhere—perhaps in our midst—was a homicidal maniac, someone with whom we might, even now, be chatting and eating.

I know that I, personally, was thankful when Gerald appeared to announce that everything was ready for the hunt. Millie emptied the contents of a small dish of candy into her pocket and smiled at me apologetically. After furtive gulps from pocket-flasks, well concealed from the eye of our host, the guests started pouring out to the hall.

Ever since my arrival I had been unable to locate Toni. Now, as I strolled to the door with Valerie and the Goschens, I caught a glimpse of him slipping out in front of us among a crowd of medical students. I flashed a look at Valerie, and for a moment her eyes met mine, worried and questioning.

It was very cold outside. Most of the women had put on gloves and extra sweaters. Even I found my leather coat none too warm. We were all gathered around Alstone on the strip of grass that lead down to the barn. I thought it rather an unfortunate spot to have chosen, because all the time that Seymour delivered his little speech of instruction and handed out the flash-lamps and guns, the broken silhouette of the building reared up behind us as a kind of memorial to past horrors and a warning of unpleasant possibilities in the future.

Darker Grows the Valley

" . . . If anyone loses the way and is unable to catch up with the others, the house is open, and they may keep themselves comfortable there until our return."

Seymour made a curt gesture towards the man with the coon dogs, and the hunt was up.

Valerie, the Goschens and I kept together in front as the party moved down the slope and out into the open country. It was a dark night and the air was gravid with unfallen snow. We could see practically nothing beyond the bright circles of light made by our pocket torches. From somewhere in front of us came the grunting and panting of the coon dogs which Seymour had hired for the occasion. Millie switched her torch on to them, and for a moment their chestnut coats gleamed vividly.

" Beauties! " she exclaimed. " Isn't it all thrilling? Murders or no murders, I'm going to enjoy myself to-night."

Nothing particularly exciting happened for the first hour. Coon-hunting can be a slow business. We roamed around the countryside for miles, crossing hedges, creeks and strips of woodland. It was interesting to catch the outline of all the familiar landmarks under these unfamiliar circumstances—interesting, too, to see the faces of one's neighbours as, every now and then, they passed through one's own little circle of light. During those first sixty

Darker Grows the Valley

minutes I must have bumped into practically everyone—Roberta, her face puffed and heavy in this unflattering illumination; Gerald, pale and nervy; Edgar, eager and with a strange gleam in his eye. There was something rather uncanny about these encounters. Everyone was tense, and they seemed somehow to charge the atmosphere around them with uneasy electricity. They did not wish to admit it, but one felt that they were all waiting and wondering. Valerie alone, in that strange assembly, seemed utterly sane. Most of the time she was by my side, calm, poised and absolutely right.

In one of the small woods we got divided from the main party. We could still hear their voices, but I was in no hurry to catch up. It was not often that I had a chance to be alone with Valerie.

“I’m worried about Toni,” she was saying. “I’m sure he’s not on the hunt. Don’t you think we should go back and look for him?” Her hand on my sleeve was trembling. “Something may have happened.”

I was just about to reassure her when I heard a faint noise ahead of us. Now there had been noises ahead of us all the evening, but this particular sound was different. It was soft and stealthy, as though whatever had made it did not want to be heard.

Instinctively I pulled Valerie towards me.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Darker Grows the Valley

My torch had become entangled with my tobacco-pouch and I had difficulty in extricating it. We listened, and once again came the sound, this time a little nearer. I found myself wishing stupidly that I had accepted Seymour's offer of a gun. At last the torch slipped into my fingers.

"Who's that?" I shouted, sending a circle of light into the darkness.

I had directed the beam with unconscious accuracy. There, pressed against a tree, stood a man. I moved the torch higher, illuminating the face. It was Mark Baines. In the flickering light he looked hardly human. His eyes had the wide, expressionless stare of an animal caught in a trap. He reminded me fantastically of a picture of the martyred Saint Sebastian I had once seen in some gallery or other.

"Mark!" I exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

He did not answer, but a puzzled, reproachful look came into his eyes. I could guess how he felt about the hunt. The very idea of an animal in pain made him physically ill. Some blind instinct, I supposed, had moved him to follow the hounds, hoping in his strange way to warn or protect the creatures of the wood. I am no sentimentalist, but at that moment I felt rather ashamed of myself and humanity for having such bad taste in our selection

Darker Grows the Valley

of pleasures. Here we were, several dozen adults, devoting an entire evening to dashing about the countryside in search of an animal to kill. The only factor that might have redeemed us in the eyes of Mark and the Almighty was that coons were hard to find. Nine times out of ten our gala hunt deteriorated into a harmless, cross-country hike.

For a few seconds the three of us stood in silence.

"You'd better be clearing off home, Mark," I said at length.

To my surprise he obeyed immediately, slipping away between the trees as noiselessly as a fox.

And then, as I turned to Valerie, the dogs started to yelp. For anyone with a trace of hunting blood in his veins, this is one of the most exhilarating sounds in the world. My whole body began to tingle in a ridiculous fashion. I completely forgot my scruples of a moment before and, pulling Valerie after me, ran forward, crying:

"Come on. They've found the scent."

We broke out of the wood and dashed towards the glowing spots of light ahead. Around us, the crisp air rang with shouts. I heard Charlie's voice, and then Roberta's, shrill and more than usually throaty. We were all running forward, helter-skelter, heedless of brambles, stones and cart-ruts.

In the chase I had completely lost Valerie.

"Where are we?" Even Gerald, who was notori-

Darker Grows the Valley

ously indifferent to the sports of the countryside, was excited. I heard him breathing heavily as I passed him.

"Down at Lych Bottom, not far from Grindle Meadow."

It was Millie's voice that answered, and then, out of pure *joie de vivre*, she let out a loud yodel.

"Come on, Doug, my boy! For the first time in thirty generations the Alstone hunt has scented a coon. We're making history!"

She grabbed my hand, and together we sped on across the coarse stubble.

The hounds, which were some distance ahead of the main party, were yelping almost continuously as they made up the hill towards Grindle Meadow. I had no idea of what had become of Valerie, and, for the moment, I did not care.

Still holding hands, Millie and I leaped a ditch.

"I may be the mother of five," she was panting, "but I still can run. How I'd love to see Roberta now. I bet you a hundred to one those breeches have split."

"What a break for the medical students!" I shouted, pulling her over a stile.

"'Break' is right!"

Laughing like two kids, we careered after the dogs.

I shall never quite know how we reached Grindle

Darker Grows the Valley

Meadow, but I remember vaulting the last gate, with Millie still valiantly at my side. In front of us we could just make out Grindle Oak—a remarkable evergreen which was famous not only from the botanical viewpoint, but also as the nucleus of a hundred years of village gossip. It loomed dim and sinister against the snow-laden sky. The dogs must have stopped at its foot. They were yowling fit to wake the dead.

“It’s treed!” I cried as we ran on. “Treed in Grindle Oak!”

Except for the leader of the hounds we were the first to arrive. The dogs had been let off their leashes and were leaping wildly against the trunk. Behind us we could hear shouts and the thud of running feet as the rest of the party hurried up. I switched my torch through the evergreen foliage, hoping to catch a glimpse of our quarry. My luck was in. For a moment, two round holes of light pricked the darkness. It was as though my flash-lamp was being doubly reflected in some hidden mirror.

“Look, Millie!” I exclaimed. “See its eyes?”

The lights quivered and then flashed away as the coon climbed higher into the tree.

“Poor little devil!” Millie was murmuring. “If only it had the sense to keep its eyes shut we could never see to shoot.”

Darker Grows the Valley

By this time the whole party had assembled and Seymour was efficiently forming us into a circle, spacing the men with guns at regular intervals round the tree. I noticed that Edgar Tailford-Jones had a gun. He stood at my side, looking like a little tin soldier. Farther down the line I could make out the burly figure of Charlie Goschen. He, too, was gripping a rifle.

“All torches on the tree, please!”

At Seymour's command Grindle Oak suddenly sprang into illumination. We watched it, breathless, and every now and then two answering lights glinted at us through the branches.

Edgar was chuckling.

“Just like Roberta's Queenie,” he whispered, nudging me and winking. He seemed to be getting a great kick out of the comparison.

“Guns ready!” Seymour sounded like a sergeant drilling raw recruits.

There was a rustle, then silence except for the whimpering of the dogs.

“Now, Mr. Goschen, will you please shoot? Fire between the eyes.”

So childish is one at these moments that I felt my heart thumping like a schoolboy's. From my right came a spurt of light and a loud report.

There was the sound of splintering wood, and a branch started to fall, showering leaves and twigs

Darker Grows the Valley

before it. Then, higher up the tree, the coon's eyes gleamed out at us.

"Missed him!" I think it was Franklin's voice I heard, reedy with excitement.

"Again, Mr. Goschen, please!"

Once more a shot rang out. The bough landed at the foot of the tree with a thud. Otherwise there was silence.

As we all bent our necks backward, we caught a glimpse of the coon. It was clinging on to an outer branch, staring down at us and looking absurdly like a small, animated fur-coat.

"Isn't he cute?" cried Millie. "And to think I came here to kill him!"

As she spoke, Alstone ordered a volley, and about ten guns fired simultaneously. This time there was a faint crackling high up in the tree which swiftly grew in volume. Something was tumbling down.

"Here she comes!" cried Franklin.

The dogs tautened, ready to receive the fierce attack which the animal would inevitably make on them, if it were still alive. A shower of leaves and broken twigs pattered down like rain. Occasionally our torches picked out the body on its slow, erratic descent through the branches.

"Gosh, it's a big one!" cried Millie.

A buzz of excitement swept round the circle of watchers as all torches lowered to the bole of the

Darker Grows the Valley

tree. Then, crashing to the patch of lighted ground, fell a dark form.

“Stand back there!” shouted Seymour. “It’s dangerous.”

The dogs sprang forward, yelping madly. Then an utterly unexpected thing happened. Their yelping changed into a low whine. They took one sniff at the little mound under the tree and cringed away, their tails between their legs,

We all pressed forward, only to stop dead at the sound of a woman’s shriek—harsh and almost insane.

It was Roberta, and she was screaming:

“Polly Baines!”

For a few seconds I thought her hysterical. I thought that the concentrated nervous strain of the evening had merely found its outlet in her. But as I pushed my way to the front of the crowd, I saw that she was right.

It was not a dead raccoon that lay under the tree, but the corpse of a little girl.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EVERYONE lurched forward. In the queer light I could see the ghoulisn curiosity scrawled across their faces in an ugly mask. The medical students from Rhodes were the worst offenders. Their eagerness was positively indecent.

Like a tiger, old Alstone had sprung across the strip of earth that separated him from the body.

"Gentlemen," he roared, "stand back! Remember, please, that this will be a matter for the police. Is Dr. Conti here?"

I could feel rather than see the peering faces of the crowd. Valerie's hand was on my arm, and through the leather of my jacket I could feel her face warm against my shoulder.

"He isn't here, sir," I volunteered.

"All right. Dr. Swanson, you step up, please. Gerald, run to the house at once and telephone Bracegirdle. Give him the directions and tell him to come here immediately."

The boy scampered off like a startled rabbit.

Darker Grows the Valley

“And Franklin”—the old man was now firing out his orders with military precision—“take our guests home. See they have everything they need. No, thank you. I want no one here but Dr. Swanson. Yes—all of you, please.”

There was something about his tone which made everyone obey without question. As I stood by his side in the darkness I could see the outlines of their figures as they moved away from Grindle Oak, instinctively keeping close together as though their very nearness lent them security from some imagined danger. Seymour and I were left alone with this gruesome bundle at our feet. For the first time I noticed that it was snowing quite heavily.

As soon as the others were out of sight, Seymour turned his flash-lamp on to the remains of Polly Baines. I stared down, fascinated. The child had been wrapped round and round with a rope until she looked like a mummy. It was not pleasant to approach too near, but I could see from her face and the torn shreds of her clothing that the buzzards had been at work. I thought of Mrs. Middleton's prophetic words: “When buzzards roost in Grindle Oak, death comes to the valley.” There had been reason enough for their roosting.

Seymour Alstone was standing with his back against the tree, gazing out at the swirling snowflakes. It would have been hard to analyse the

Darker Grows the Valley

expression on his face, which never changed save when I lit a cigarette, and a frown of deep annoyance puckered his brow. Only once did he break his silence, almost half an hour after the excited voices of the guests had faded into the distance.

"They ought to be here by now," he snapped, shining his flash-light on to his heavy watch. "I wonder what that boy's been up to."

It was a strange vigil waiting there with that silent man and the corpse. Any examination of the body was, of course, out of the question. There was nothing I could do—nothing but occasionally to wipe the snow from the little mound at my feet. I lit cigarette after cigarette, burning away the minutes until at last I heard Bracegirdle's familiar voice calling my name.

"Thought I'd never find you," he said, shaking the snow from his shoulders. "Mr. Goschen's directions weren't any too plain over the 'phone."

I remember being distinctly surprised that Charlie rather than Gerald Alstone had told Bracegirdle of the discovery, but my mind was far too occupied with the present calamity to worry about what, at that time, seemed so trivial an incident.

With the arrival of the police, Seymour had become efficiency itself. He told the whole story of what had occurred, and in the rasping quality of his voice I could detect unspoken censure of

Darker Grows the Valley

Bracegirdle's failure to instigate a more thorough search.

After listening to the main facts, the deputy interrupted him a trifle impatiently.

"I suppose you're prepared to identify the corpse, Dr. Swanson?"

He bent over the body, upon which the coroner, grumbling at the unsatisfactory weather conditions, was conducting a cursory inspection.

"Yes, that's Polly Baines all right."

"And you're sure it *did* fall from the tree?"

"No question about it. You could get thirty witnesses to prove that."

"Hm, yes. There's the place where the bullet tore through the rope. Nasty business, eh?"

"Have you any opinion as to how long she's been dead, Dr. Swanson?" asked the coroner.

"No, Doctor."

All this time Bracegirdle was quietly instructing his men. Some shone torches up into the boughs and scoured the ground beneath it. Others, with the aid of a magnesium flare, were attempting a photograph despite the thickly falling snow. I found myself admiring the deputy immensely. There was a certainty about him, a basic common sense, which took all the fairy-tale horror out of the evening's events. Here we were at midnight in a snowstorm with the mutilated corpse of a child

Darker Grows the Valley

at our feet, yet Bracegirdle simplified it down to a mere matter of daily routine.

“Well, Doctor, there’s nothing much we can do to-night.” I noticed, to my amusement, that the deputy was utterly ignoring the existence of old Alstone, who stood restlessly at his side. “The news must be broken to the Baineses, of course, but the longer that’s put off the better. Someone must get up that tree, too, but it can wait till to-morrow. Darn this snow! It makes it absolutely hopeless to see anything. Let’s call it a day.”

He signalled two of his men, who very carefully lifted the small corpse and carried it over to the waiting cars.

“If Dr. Conti’s around,” remarked the coroner, “I’m sure Dr. Brooks would be glad to have him help with the autopsy.”

“He isn’t here,” I answered, “but if I see him I’ll give him your message.”

The car trundled slowly off over the whitening ground. I watched the lights gradually dwindling into the darkness.

After they were well away, I started off with Seymour for the house. We walked in silence, our coat collars turned up against the driving snow.

Seymour had always been a mystery to me. Now he seemed even more puzzling than ever. I had never swallowed wholesale the local opinion of him

Darker Grows the Valley

as a dyspeptic *nouveau riche* with a Napoleon-complex. He had, if prejudiced reports spoke true, indulged in the sort of business career which is not recommended by the Sunday-school pamphlets. He was, too, a bit of a tartar. But, nevertheless, there was a dignity in his very relentlessness, a genuine poise in his arrogance. At that particular moment I would have given a great deal to have had the courage to ask him what he knew of this latest affair. I could not help but think that somehow, however remotely, all these tragedies *did* have a connection with the erect, grizzle-haired old man at my side. And, of course, there was the incident of the parked car which Toni and I had seen on the night the setter disappeared. There was the problem of Roberta's angry, broken sentences. What did it all mean? Should I have told Bracegirdle what I had heard? These questions were tumbling about in my mind as together we turned into the Alstones' drive.

But none of them were fated to be answered just then. At the front porch Seymour bade me a curt good night and hurried in alone.

The great house was in darkness except for a few lighted bedrooms. I gathered that the guests must have hurried home pretty quickly. The deserted drive confirmed my speculation.

It was extremely dark down the side path where

Darker Grows the Valley

I had left my car. I stumbled along through the slippery snow, cursing myself for not having switched on the lights before going up to the party.

At last I bumped against a mudguard, and fumbling around the side of the car, slipped my fingers over the door handle.

As I did so, a voice whispered:

"Who is it?"

"Valerie!"

"Oh, it's you, Doug. How you scared me! I couldn't hear you coming in the snow."

I opened the door and squatted down at her side.

"Whatever are you doing here?" I asked.

"Waiting for Toni. This is his car, isn't it?"

Her voice was strained, and I felt she was eager to keep the conversation on banalities. "I never can tell yours from his in the dark. They're both Plymouths, only yours is red and his is black. Or is it the other way round?"

She had put on a fur coat, and the soft hair brushed my cheek.

"I'm afraid it's not only our cars you muddle up, Valerie," I said, laughing. "Sometimes I believe you think of me as just a part of Toni. Addendum: one pleasant, dull room-mate. I'd love to feel I had some sort of individuality to you."

"Don't be an idiot, Doug." Her hand searched for mine and squeezed it. "You have, you know

Darker Grows the Valley

you have. I put you in the category of Major Perquisites: one bachelor, a little above the average height, attractive grey eyes, sweet smile, nice to mother, reliable——”

“That sounds like a butler advertising for ‘position in lady’s family.’ ”

“And that, Doug,” she said softly, “sounds rather like a proposal. You never have, you know.”

It was good to be sitting there alone with her, pretending that the horrors of the past few hours had no meaning. In the midst of death, I thought, evolving my first epigram, we are in life. Valerie was young and warm and close to me. And, although for months I had been steadfastly refusing to admit it, I was in love with her. What I might have said in that mood of heightened emotion I shall never know, for she suddenly brought me back to earth and the realities of the moment.

“Doug, what do you suppose has happened to him?” Her hand had slipped from mine, and I noticed the match quiver as she lit a cigarette.

“Toni?”

“He wasn’t—er—with the others, was he?”

I patted her shoulder comfortingly.

“Don’t worry, my dear, he’s most likely having a conference with your uncle.”

“No, he’s not. I waited till all the guests had gone. Then I—couldn’t bear it any longer, so I

Darker Grows the Valley

came out here." The burning tip of her cigarette swooped downward as she knocked the ash on to the floor. "I suppose it's all over now—I mean the police and everything?"

"Yes, Bracegirdle came. It *was* Polly, of course. Listen my dear, you're tired. We'll give Toni two minutes, and if he doesn't show up I'll drive you home. It's no good hanging around."

"Doug, you're a darling."

"And when you think of taking on a butler, mind I have first refusal."

She laughed.

"You're hired right now. Open that window, please, and throw out my cigarette."

I obeyed her, and for the next few minutes we sat without speaking. I was just suggesting removing to my car when the door at my side swung open.

Valerie started.

"Toni, is that you?"

"Sorry I'm late." My co-tenant's voice was curiously strained and low. "Who on earth—oh, hello, Doug."

"And what have you been up to?" I asked as I scrambled out.

"Just mucking around," he answered evasively. "You'd better go on first. I can't start till your car's out of the way."

Darker Grows the Valley

“ O.K. Good night, Valerie.”

I crunched through the snow to the other Plymouth and switched on the lights. The engine was pretty cold and it took me several minutes before I finally got started. As I slithered off down the drive, I glanced into the side-mirror. Toni was backing away from the wall, his headlights spreading a wide semi-circle across the white ground.

I shall never forget that drive home. To an artist, I suppose, it might have been picturesque, but to me it was several degrees below hellish. I had no chains and was in constant fear of a skid. One of the windows had jammed and I was obliged to put up with an icy blast striking on my left ear. As I passed the Baines's cottage I noticed a light in one of the upper rooms. There was, too, a faint glimmer from Mark's barn. The storm was gathering in strength, and every sound was muffled in that mysterious silence which comes with the first fall of snow. It was deathly quiet. The only noise I remember was the hollow echo of the car's wheels as I crossed the bare wooden boards of the covered bridge.

On arriving home I had a good bit of trouble getting into the garage. At the best of times it is a tricky business. One has to swerve in at a particular angle and then back. That night, in the driving snow, it took me several minutes before I

Darker Grows the Valley

finally snapped off the ignition and, leaving one garage door open for Toni, closed the other with a bang.

It was curious, I reflected. In the past few hours I had run the gamut of all the emotions—terror, pity, love. Yet, as I beat the clotted snow from my shoes, the only sensation that remained with me was one of vague irritation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN I woke next morning the snow was still falling and the whole countryside was blanketed with white. I looked into Toni's room as I went downstairs to breakfast and saw that his bed had not been slept in.

Hardly had I started on my bacon and eggs when Bracegirdle was announced. After being up all night he had been working with his men in Grindle Meadow since daylight. He accepted my offer of breakfast with alacrity.

"Any clues?" I asked, as Lucinda started to fry his eggs.

"I can't tell you much until the autopsy report comes in, but we've found another body."

"Good God!" Immediately my mind flew to Toni's empty bed, but the twinkle in Bracegirdle's eye reassured me.

"Only Polly Baines's kitten, Dr. Swanson. Or rather, all that the buzzards left of it. One of my men climbed that old oak tree and found it caught in the branches."

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Well, what do you make of it all? ” I glanced across at Bracegirdle, who was buttering a slice of toast and sniffing appreciatively at the coffee. “ Fastened up there, I suppose? ”

“ Yes. The child was bound, and then someone must have climbed the tree, thrown the rope over one of the top branches and hoisted her up—and the kitten, too. The rope had been twisted and tied fast. They might have stayed there till the Last Trump if the bullets from your guns last night hadn’t just happened to shoot through the rope.”

“ If it weren’t so awful, it would be funny,” I remarked. “ Try some of this peach jam.”

Bracegirdle helped himself. “ Funny’s the word. As I said before, there’s no rhyme nor reason to the whole business.”

“ Still, it’s a pretty good place to hide a body—at the top of the only thick evergreen in the neighbourhood. Sanitary, too, when you come to think of it.”

I had become so accustomed to the idea that Polly Baines was dead that it was impossible for me to get tragic about it now. A note of tragedy, however, was injected into the proceedings a few minutes later when Toni came in, having spent the night at Rhodes helping Dr. Brooks with the autopsy. He, also, had had no breakfast, so Lucinda was dispatched to prepare a third meal.

Darker Grows the Valley

While he was waiting, Toni lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“ This goddam criminal of yours, Bracegirdle, is the most monotonous, the most unoriginal example of a monomania——”

“ You mean——? ”

“ Yes. I mean exactly that. God knows, I’ve opened a thousand cadavers in my life, but this one was the most complicated business I’ve ever seen. What with natural decomposition and the fowls of the air——”

“ But how was she killed? ” I interrupted quickly.

Toni threw away his cigarette and sat down to the breakfast-table.

“ She died of exposure, loss of blood and, well—general rough treatment. There were five bullets in her, but I’m ready to swear that they came from old Alstone’s guns. Apart from that, we could find no lethal wound. In fact, it’s my guess that she was alive when someone trussed her up and hoisted her into that tree. Of course, I wouldn’t care to be quoted.”

Bracegirdle rose from the table, pushing aside, only half-eaten, his plate of eggs and bacon.

“ I’m getting back to work,” he said grimly.

As he reached the door, Toni called after him with his mouth full:

“ By the way, Bracegirdle, just as I was leaving,

Darker Grows the Valley

one of your men brought in the remains of that kitten. The person who killed it must have liked animals better than children, because there was a neat little hole in its skull which Dr. Brooks said was probably caused by a bullet from a small revolver. Of course I'm no ballistic expert, but it wasn't made by any of Seymour Alstone's guns last night."

The deputy seemed pleased.

"Well, that's something to go on, anyway."

"Doubt whether it'll help much," said Toni. "He's had almost a month to get rid of the gun."

After Bracegirdle had left, Toni's mood changed. I asked a few more questions about the autopsy, but his answers were curt and, while he spoke, he kept staring at me, half-curious, half-amused. Somehow I had the impression that he suspected me of knowing something which I was keeping to myself. But, if that was the case, he was too tired to try and pump me. After the third egg he announced his intention of going to bed and duly disappeared upstairs.

Left to myself I felt restless and uneasy. I had been unable to work on my article for some time now, and the snow made riding out of the question. In desperation, I decided to stroll round to the Goschens'. Millie was always a good pick-me-up, and perhaps I should find Valerie there, too.

Darker Grows the Valley

Complete with arctics and muffler I started off down the drive. I had not gone very far when I saw a car bearing down upon me. Considering the snow it was going at an unusual speed. I stepped into a drift to let it pass. As I did so, it drew up and old Alstone's head emerged from the window. He called and beckoned imperiously.

"Do you know where I can find the Sheriff's Deputy?" His voice seemed to lack its usual complacency. "I have been calling the station for half an hour. Nobody answers."

"I expect they're all down in Grindle Meadow, sir," I said. "Is anything wrong?"

"Yes," he replied tersely. "I must see Bracegirdle immediately." He started fingering the brake-lever and then seemed to change his mind. "Care to come along?"

Assenting with enthusiasm, I jumped in at his side. To my surprise I noticed that his hand was shaking as he snapped the car into gear. His face, too, wore an expression I had never seen before. Until that moment he had been the only person in the valley to preserve a completely detached attitude towards the series of crimes that had taken place among us. Now, I could see in his eyes the same look of uncertainty and apprehension which lately had stared out from those of all the other inhabitants of Grindle.

Darker Grows the Valley

He offered no explanation of his peculiar behaviour, and I knew him too well to venture a question, yet, as the car turned up towards Grindle Meadow, my mind was full of confused speculation. Had some new atrocity been committed since last night? Had some member of the Alstone family been the latest victim? Or had Seymour discovered some part of a solution—something which shocked and frightened him?

I was not kept long in suspense. In a few minutes we had parked the car and were hurrying across the meadow towards Grindle Oak, under whose snow-laden boughs Bracegirdle and his men were busily at work, searching for more clues.

The deputy seemed surprised to see me again after so short a time. He looked even more surprised when he noticed Seymour's pale, curiously altered face.

"You want me, sir?"

"I do." Alstone stared balefully at the oak tree.

"My grandson is missing."

Both Bracegirdle and myself were completely taken aback. I stopped dead, gazing at him in frank amazement.

"You mean Gerald's disappeared?"

"I think it is worse than that. I think he has been killed."

"Killed!"

Darker Grows the Valley

“ One of the maids discovered this morning that his bed had not been slept in. The butler discovered also that the gun-room was in a state of extreme confusion—chairs and tables upset, guns out of place, and all over the floor there was blood.”

By now Bracegirdle had recovered his official composure.

“ There was no body, sir? ”

“ No. No sign of Gerald—no sign at all.”

“ When was he last seen? ”

The old man lowered his eyes.

“ That I cannot tell you. The butler saw him for a moment after the hunt. I, personally, set eyes on him for the last time when I sent him back from here to telephone you. I have yet to ask my guests whether——”

“ Is there a 'phone in the gun-room? ” I broke in suddenly.

“ Yes. There are instruments in all the downstairs rooms.”

I turned excitedly to Bracegirdle.

“ It was Charlie Goschen who called you about the discovery of Polly Baines, wasn't it? ”

“ Yes. I checked up on it. He didn't see Gerald around, so he rang me to make sure.” The deputy looked up from his note-book. “ You think someone might have seen Gerald going into the gun-room to 'phone and—stopped him. Someone, perhaps,

Darker Grows the Valley

who wanted to prevent him from getting in touch with the authorities? ”

“ Exactly.”

“ Was anything missing, Mr. Alstone? ”

“ Yes. A revolver.”

“ And you left everything untouched? ”

“ Naturally. Nothing has been removed. I had the room locked immediately after I had made my examination. No one but myself and the butler has been allowed to enter.”

“ Good work, Mr. Alstone. We’ll be right round. You go ahead! ”

Within a very few minutes, Bracegirdle and his men had joined Seymour and me in Alstone’s house. The old man unlocked the door to the gun-room and I noticed at once that its appearance bore striking testimony to the truth of his earlier report. Everything was in a state of wild disorder and there were splashes of dried blood all over the floor.

“ The revolver is missing from here.” Seymour was pointing to an empty space in one of the upper racks. “ I happened to notice that it was there last night when I came in to get the guns for the party.”

“ Did anyone come in here after the hunt? ”

“ No. I’m afraid the butler was a trifle negligent. It is one of his duties to inspect every room before retiring for the night. Yesterday, however, in all the excitement, he omitted to do so.”

Darker Grows the Valley

"No one put the guns back, then? "

"No, they are being cleaned, but—I've had one of my men count them and they're all there."

"Hm." Bracegirdle was staring at the floor and tracing out the path of blood-stains. Suddenly he started eagerly forward. "Look!" he exclaimed. "He went through this door—or, at least, somebody did. There's blood on the handle."

The deputy got out his handkerchief and carefully opened the door.

"Don't touch anything," he cautioned. "This may be a case when finger-prints will help. Scott, call Bill Murphy on the 'phone and tell him to bring his kit out to the Alstones' house. Make it snappy."

The side entrance to the gun-room led out on to a covered porch from which there were steps leading towards the back of the building. As we hurried out I noticed at once that the trail of blood continued over the floor of the porch to the top of the steps. There it became obscured by the thick fall of snow.

"Darn this snow," muttered Bracegirdle. "I wonder——" He turned to Seymour. "His car isn't missing, I suppose? "

"Nothing is missing. I have already made investigations, and reported all I know. I have also sent my son, Franklin, over to see young Foote at the hospital. It occurred to me that the boy might

Darker Grows the Valley

be there. But I think it unlikely. Besides, it would have been impossible for him to get there."

"But your guests? He might have gone with one of them."

"It is possible, of course. I have not yet questioned them. I'm afraid it would only spread alarm and produce nothing."

Bracegirdle grunted.

"I should like to speak to the servants, please."

Seymour nodded and turned towards the gun-room.

"No, not in there, Mr. Alstone. I want that room locked, if you don't mind." There was a note in Bracegirdle's voice which made me suspect that he secretly enjoyed issuing orders to the tyrant of the valley.

We passed into the living-room, and the servants were summoned one by one. Their stories were remarkably consistent. Dr. Conti had stayed behind for a while after the others left for the coon-hunt. At some period of the evening he had gone out and no one had seen him return, though one of the housemaids thought she had heard a voice which sounded like his later on in the evening. Her evidence, however, was not conclusive since, on being questioned, she admitted that she really could not have recognized Toni's voice if she had heard it.

Hall, the butler, was the only one who made any

Darker Grows the Valley

real contribution. He had opened the door to Mr. Gerald at about eleven o'clock—some ten minutes before the other guests returned. The young gentleman had been out of breath and very agitated. He had said nothing to Hall about the finding of Polly Baines's body.

"Did he go to the telephone?" queried Bracegirdle.

"Well, sir, I don't rightly know. I thought I heard his voice as I was going back to the servants' quarters, but I couldn't say whether he was telephoning or not."

"You didn't hear anything else—no fight or quarrel?"

"No, sir."

"And you didn't see anyone hanging around?"

"Well." Hall hesitated a moment. "A little while before Mr. Gerald came back, it so happened I looked out because Angy—that is one of the girls, sir—said it had started to snow. I caught a glimpse of a man outside the backdoor and I called out to him. He said: 'It's only me,' and then went round behind the barn."

"You recognized the voice?"

"Yes, sir. It was—Mark Baines."

Bracegirdle shot me a swift glance. "Did you by any chance hear a shot or any noise that was out of the ordinary?"

Darker Grows the Valley

“No, I didn’t—at least, not then, sir. A little later on, after the party got back, I thought I heard one, but I didn’t pay much attention, as it seemed to come from outside and at this time of year—what with the cold weather and cars back-firing——”

“What do you mean by ‘it seemed to come from outside’?”

“Well, sir, you see I took it for granted. The report was not loud.”

“Might it have come from the gun-room?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t say, sir. I was in the kitchen, which is at a considerable distance from that part of the house.”

“You’re sure it was *after* the party had returned?”

“Yes, sir. The young gentlemen from the college had just started to sing and I remember thinking that, seeing as how——” He broke off with a nervous glance in the direction of Seymour.

“You couldn’t say who was in the house when you heard the shot?”

Hall explained that Mr. Alstone had given orders for the door to be left open as soon as the guests began to come back, so he had admitted no one excepting Mr. Gerald. From the noise they were making, he judged that most of them had returned at the time of the shot. He had heard Mrs.

Darker Grows the Valley

Goschen's voice, but could not recognize anyone else's.

"Did anyone stay on after the others had gone?"

Hall thought a moment before replying. "Yes, sir. I remember going into the reception-room to clear away the glasses. Miss Valerie was there alone. She asked me whether I had seen Dr. Conti, and, as I couldn't help her, she said she was going home."

"How long was that after the guests had left?"

"About half an hour, sir."

"You saw neither Miss Middleton nor Dr. Conti again?"

"No, sir."

The butler had no sooner been dismissed than he came back into the room, coughing apologetically.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bracegirdle, but there's a young person at the backdoor who wants to speak to you. Says it's urgent, sir."

The deputy glanced questioningly at Mr. Alstone.

"Who is it, man? Don't stand there trying to make mysteries." Seymour's voice was thick with irritation.

"One of the Baines children, sir. Young Tommy. He says his mother——"

"Show him in."

Tommy Baines, a lad of ten, looked dazed with fear as he was led by Hall into the enormous living-

Darker Grows the Valley

room. Doubtless he was remembering the time, not far distant, when he had been caught trespassing in the flower-beds. Far too frightened to speak, he looked at Seymour with the fascinated stare of a rabbit watching a weasel. Bracegirdle, who sensed the situation, spoke to the boy in fatherly tones.

“ Well, Tommy, what is it? ”

At length the boy started to speak slowly, but his eyes never left Mr. Alstone's face.

“ Please, Mr. Bracegirdle, Ma says she saw something last night what you ought to know about and could you come round, please, sir.”

“ Your mother! ” I exclaimed. “ I thought she was in hospital.”

“ No, sir. She wouldn't stay so our Mark went 'n fetched her yesterday afternoon. But she's in bed, sir, so she can't come over, and she's been cryin' somethin' terrible ever since she heard about our Poll.”

“ Tell your mother we'll be over in ten minutes.”

The boy trotted off, and, after giving instructions to his men, Bracegirdle beckoned me aside and suggested that we should go together to the Baines's cottage.

It was evident that he did not wish Seymour to come along.

CHAPTER NINE

MRS. BAINES was in bed when we arrived and looked remarkably well considering all the circumstances. There was something indestructible and eternal about her which made me feel sure that, in a short space of time, she would probably be acquiring another husband and producing even more children. Such is the tenacity of those who are not too strong mentally.

I congratulated her on her appearance and remarked—rather fatuously—that I was glad to see her back from the hospital so soon.

“Back?” she echoed, and a bright spot of colour appeared in each cheek as she spoke. “Where would you expect me to be but back home when my family is bein’ murdered in traps and trees——”

Bracegirdle made clucking noises like a distressed hen.

“There was something you wanted to tell me?” he asked gently.

Mrs. Baines gave a little laugh which verged on the hysterical.

“They’ve taken my Polly and they’ve taken my Jo, but there’s no reason why I shouldn’t do all

Darker Grows the Valley

I can to—even though it's a family as—well, never mind. But I saw him there, and murder is murder even if some people are only getting what's coming to 'em."

Bracegirdle looked puzzled. Then he winked at me and tapped his grey hair surreptitiously with his finger.

I nodded.

"Take it easy, Mrs. Baines," I cautioned. "You mustn't upset yourself. You're still weak."

The woman sat bolt upright in bed.

"Weak I may be, Dr. Swanson, but not so weak I can't use my own eyes, and not so blind I can't see what's in front of 'em, even if it was in the middle of the night, and the snow blowin' in the window——"

"Hadn't you better begin at the beginning?" I suggested.

Mrs. Baines's agitation seemed now to have given way to a mood of comparative composure.

"Well, Dr. Swanson, Mark fetched me in from the hospital yesterday afternoon, and Susie—that's my sister—put me to bed and made me comfortable here. The window was open—Susie's a great one for fresh air—and I went off to sleep soon's I had my supper. Some time in the middle of the night I woke up feeling cold, and when I turned on the light I saw the snow blowin' in all over me."

Darker Grows the Valley

“You’ve no idea what time it was?”

“Not then, I didn’t, but after it was all over, I screamed, and Susie came in and put me back in bed and said it was almost midnight. I was cold and trembling, so she went downstairs——”

“But,” I interrupted, “what did you see that frightened you so?”

Bracegirdle was standing by the window, looking out on to the road that led past the Baines’s cottage, across the covered bridge towards our house, the Goschens’ and the Tailford-Jones’s. It was obvious that he attached little importance to Mrs. Baines’s story—treating it like the hundreds of other bits of ill-founded gossip which had reached his ears in the past few weeks.

“What did I see?” The woman’s voice had sunk almost to a whisper. “I saw the body of young Mr. Gerald—him as they say is missing this morning like my poor Polly was a while back.”

Bracegirdle had spun round and was staring at her incredulously.

“Where—how?” he snapped.

I shot him a warning glance.

“Just tell us in your own way, Mrs. Baines,” I said quickly.

She was waving a weather-beaten hand towards the window.

“I saw him from there,” she continued. “I had

Darker Grows the Valley

got out of bed and was trying to shut it when I saw a car going down the road towards the covered bridge. I didn't pay no attention to it till after it was gone, and then—then—I saw *it*. It was dragging along behind like a bag of potatoes. In the light from the window I could see the face as plain as yours, for all it was snowing. And if it was my dying breath I'd swear it was the body of Gerald Alstone behind that car."

The narration seemed to have exhausted her, for she sank back into the pillows and, for a moment or two, was quite incapable of giving coherent answers to the questions that Bracegirdle poured out in quick succession.

No, she could not tell us whether the car was large or small, roadster or sedan. It had bright lights in front and behind, and there was a thick layer of snow on top. Apart from that, she knew nothing.

We left her, at last, to the ministrations of Susie, who, in a brief interview on the stairs, confirmed that part of her sister's story which concerned herself.

"Well, what d'you make of it?" I queried as Bracegirdle and I trudged through the snow towards the garden gate.

"Hooey—just so much hooey. The woman is sick. She's been listening to gossip. She wakes

Darker Grows the Valley

up in the middle of the night and gets scared. You'll notice that she didn't tell her sister it was young Alstone's body. Apparently she only thought of that after she heard he was missing—just to make a good story."

"But there might be something in it."

"And there might be something in the thousand and one crazy stories that are going round Grindle. I ask you, Dr. Swanson. That woman said she'd *seen* the body of Gerald Alstone dragged behind a car. It was snowing, and there's not much light from her window. How on earth——?" He broke off with the nearest approach to impatience I had yet seen in him. "Why, even in broad daylight it would be impossible to recognize a body from that distance. It might—as she herself suggested—have been a bag of potatoes."

"But people don't deliver potatoes at midnight," I commented mildly. "And they don't usually drag them behind cars."

We had now reached the road, where the snow had already been crushed and dirtied by passing cars. About a hundred yards to our left loomed the covered bridge—an old-fashioned structure which takes the road over Grindle Creek. As I saw it, there flashed through my mind an idea which, as it afterwards turned out, was my only real contribution towards the solving of the case—

Darker Grows the Valley

the only bit of pure deduction of which I was guilty throughout the whole affair. My brain child was conceived, gestated and brought to parturition in the twinkling of an eye.

I seized the deputy's arm and almost dragged him towards the covered bridge.

"Listen," I exclaimed, "if Mrs. Baines *wasn't* lying—if that *was* Gerald Alstone's body she saw—well, the car was going in the direction of the covered bridge. There's no snow there——"

"I'm afraid I don't get you, Dr. Swanson."

I was hurrying forward, shouting over my shoulder at the recalcitrant Bracegirdle.

"You think that Gerald was killed either in the gun-room or near by; then he was carried over the porch and down the steps. Up to that point you can trace him by the blood-stains, but after that the snow made further observation impossible. All right. Mrs. Baines said his body was dragged past her window around midnight. We know he was—or had been—bleeding. The friction with the road would constantly have been making fresh contusions. If it weren't for the snow we might find blood on the road. But our murderer was either darned clever or darned lucky. His tracks are obscured—that is, whenever he is out in the open. But, there is one place where there's no snow to hide his trail. Here it is."

Darker Grows the Valley

“The covered bridge.”

“Yes, there’s hardly any snow on the surface here. Now, if Mrs. Baines is right, we might find some trace of blood—there’s just a chance.”

And blood we found—after a long and back-aching search. Dried into the old planks of the bridge in two places were minute, purpling spots. Bracegirdle clipped off a piece of the stained wood and put it tenderly in an envelope. For about half an hour we were down on hands and knees like a couple of schoolboys playing at sleuths. Here and there were fresh abrasions in the surface of the wood. Splinters had been raised and pressed down. Finally, it seemed, we became so familiar with our field of activities that we could reconstruct a broad swath across the bridge—a swath marked occasionally with infinitesimal blood-stains and bordered by a faint ridge of dust and dirty fragments of snow.

At length we stood up and gazed at each other solemnly.

“Looks as though Mrs. Baines was right,” commented Bracegirdle as he felt for his pipe. “I have to thank you for your suggestion.”

“Well, what next?”

“I must get back to my men. Find out particulars of all cars passing this way last night. Start a search for the body along the road. There’s just a chance they may have dumped it somewhere. By

Darker Grows the Valley

the way, Dr. Swanson, I think we'll keep this little matter to ourselves for a while. There's no point in getting Mr. Alstone worried unnecessarily."

I nodded agreement.

"And I'm going to ask you another favour, Dr. Swanson. I want a talk with young Foote out at the hospital. I was wondering if you'd go along with me."

"That's fine. I was planning to go in to-day anyway. I intend to live in my room at the college for a bit. Looks as though the snow's here to stay and I don't like that long drive. Besides, I haven't any chains."

"I'd be glad to take you in," said Bracegirdle. "I'll come for you in my car at four o'clock."

At three it started snowing again, but Bracegirdle arrived promptly at four, having spent a busy afternoon. The stains from the bridge had been analysed and proved to be blood. He had started checking up on the cars, but, apart from the obvious fact that the Goschens, the Tailford-Joneses, Toni and myself were bound to cross the covered bridge on our way home from the Alstones', he had learnt nothing. An extensive search for Gerald had been inaugurated with no result.

At the hospital we were informed that Peter's parents were with him and, consequently, we were obliged to wait a few moments.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ There’s just one little thing,” Bracegirdle began, as we sat together on a bench in the corridor. “ Of course, it’s a mere matter of routine, but Mr. Foote’s leg was broken, wasn’t it? It wouldn’t have been medically possible, I suppose, for him to have been about last night? ”

“ Good God, no! ” I exclaimed. “ His leg’s in a plaster cast. I doubt whether he could even get out of bed to go to the lavatory. But here’s the resident. I’ll ask him.”

Purvis was bearing down upon us, large and smiling. With admirable tact I phrased my questions in such a way that Bracegirdle could understand and Purvis’s suspicions were not aroused. The resident laughed to scorn the idea that Peter could have been one yard from his bed within the last week.

“ Hope to have the cast off in a few days,” he said cheerfully. “ But, till then——”

We were interrupted by the opening of Peter’s door. A large, expensive-looking woman with a sweet face and sad eyes was leaving the room. She was followed by Marcus Foote, leather magnate, a short, stocky man with a prominent jaw and the same dark hair as his son. Bracegirdle hurried into the room and Purvis introduced me to Peter’s parents. Both Mr. and Mrs. Foote expressed their pleasure at making my acquaintance.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Well,” I said, “ you ought to be proud of your son, Mrs. Foote. That was a brave thing he did.”

“ Brave, but foolish.” Mrs. Foote’s face broke into a faint smile. “ Peter’s always been like that—excitable and madcap. I suppose I should be proud of him, having tried to save those horses, but ”—she smiled again a little sadly—“ you know how mothers are. We’d much rather have our children dull and safe than headstrong and courageous.”

Marcus Foote had been standing at our side in silence. Now he turned to me.

“ You live in Grindle, I believe, Dr. Swanson? ” His voice was smooth and well modulated.

I nodded.

“ There’s a little favour I would like to ask. Mrs. Foote and I feel——” He paused for a moment and, seeing his embarrassment, I led him into an empty room.

“ It’s about Mark Baines, Dr. Swanson. I understand he’s a little difficult to approach and, after all, he did save my son’s life. I was wondering whether, perhaps, you——” He produced a cheque-book from his pocket.

“ A trifle, a mere trifle,” murmured Mrs. Foote. “ It could be done without any fuss.”

“ Your name is Douglas, I believe? ” Foote senior was scribbling in his cheque-book. “ I will

Darker Grows the Valley

make this out to you, if you don't mind. I'm sure you'll be willing to do this for us."

They had gone before I realized what had happened. As I glanced down at the slip of pink paper in my hand, I saw that it was a cheque to my order for one thousand dollars.

Stuffing it in my pocket, I hurried into Peter's room. The boy was sitting up in bed talking excitedly to Bracegirdle.

"... Yes, the operator said it came through around eleven-thirty." He smiled at me and then continued: "I was asleep at the time and got no notification of it till this morning. The nurse told me that whoever it was that had called had been scared or worried about something. He had asked for me, and then, being told he couldn't get me till the morning, rang off, leaving no message."

"He hasn't called again to-day?"

"No, the only call I had this morning was from my father."

"There's nothing else you can tell us that might throw light on the business, Mr. Foote?"

"Nothing at the moment. Mr. Franklin Alstone came to see me this morning. I told him all I know, which was not much. But let me think things over. Something may come to me."

Bracegirdle grunted, and, beckoning to me, took his leave. Without a word I followed him down

Darker Grows the Valley

the corridor to the telephone operator's desk. The girl on the five-till-twelve shift had just come on duty. Yes, she remembered the call in question. Someone had asked to be put through to Mr. Foote's room at eleven-thirty-four. "Said it was very urgent. Seemed rather jumpy. Of course, it's most irregular to put calls through to the patients after nine-thirty."

"Was it a man or a woman?" asked Bracegirdle.

Miss Potts pushed at her vivid yellow hair.

"Well, it's difficult to say, Mr. Bracegirdle. You see, Mr. Bracegirdle, the voice was sort of high and excited. And what with so many calls coming through, a girl doesn't pay so much attention. Unless, of course, she's one of the kind that listens where she's no business to."

"But, surely, Miss Potts, it's easy enough to tell the difference between a man and a woman on the 'phone."

"If it was easy, I could have told you, couldn't I?" Miss Potts's eyes were round and injured. "I tell you it might have been either, and that's all I know, Mr. Bracegirdle."

"You asked him to leave a message?"

"Naturally," she snapped. "That's the regular procedure."

"And he wouldn't?"

"I don't know." She turned away primly,

Darker Grows the Valley

pretending to have discovered a document of the utmost importance which required her immediate attention.

"How do you mean—you don't know?"

"Just what I say. He or she was just about to say something. There was a sort of scuffling sound and the receiver was banged down."

Bracegirdle looked surprised.

"You mean it sounded as though someone had interrupted?"

Miss Potts's manicured hands were performing amazing convolutions with the telephone plugs.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Mr. Bracegirdle," she remarked. "Yes, Dr. Klein. Certainly, Dr. Klein. Just a minute, Dr. Klein."

Announcing irritably that her evidence might be required in court, Bracegirdle turned away.

Just after he had left, I bumped into Toni. He wore a dirty apron and carried a rack of test-tubes in his hand.

"Hello, Doug! What've you been doing all day?"

"Sleuthing."

I outlined the day's experiences.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he asked suddenly.

"Do? There's nothing we can do."

"So!" His mouth was twisted in a curious

Darker Grows the Valley

inward smile. "All right, Doug, my boy. If you don't want to be confidential—don't."

He paused as if expecting me to say something.

"I might mention," he continued, and now he was smiling frankly, "that if you don't want to be confidential, I needn't either. In fact——"

He broke off and was gone.

But what he meant by these curious remarks I had not the faintest idea.

CHAPTER TEN

FOR the next few days the snow remained impenetrable. Consequently, Toni and I stayed on at the hospital, leaving Lucinda in sole command of the farm-house. Except for the inquest on Polly Baines which I was subpoenaed to attend, I was entirely cut off from inside developments in our local mystery. The inquest itself brought to light very little that was new. The pathologist's findings were such as to shock even the hard-boiled country jurors, and, after a verdict of wilful murder had been passed, the coroner characterized the crime as the most outrageous and fiendish in the annals of Cotuit County. In view of the latest facts he added, it was obvious that Jo Baines, too, had been the victim of wilful murder. The same day a verdict was returned to that effect, and the killer in Grindle had two deaths officially to his credit.

After having lived in the very midst of the crimes, sleeping, eating and drinking them, as it were, it was curious to find oneself on the outside, depending entirely upon the newspapers for informa-

Darker Grows the Valley

tion. It was curious, too, and a little disconcerting to realize what a difference Gerald Alstone's disappearance had made in arousing public interest. There is, apparently, nothing of particular significance in the strange death of an obscure gardener and his little daughter. A small paragraph on a middle page was all that it had rated in the minds of the newspaper editors. With the intrusion of Mr. Alstone's grandson, however, the affairs in Grindle suddenly became headline news, and the less reputable tabloids made the day hideous with their lurid accounts of "the dread events that were taking their grim toll in the terror-stricken vale." Hourly, it seemed, the newstands fed to the public papers black with: "Mystery Slayer Still Loose in Small Rural Area." . . . "Is Steel-Magnate's Missing Grandson Next Victim?" . . . "Appalling Atrocities Inaugurate Reign of Terror." . . . "Blood under Bridge Hints of more Horror to Come."

During the following weeks any ambitious Dillinger with a taste for publicity would have been disappointed to find his latest killing relegated to the second page. A famous radio crooner who selected that particular moment to get divorced had to be satisfied with his photograph ignominiously placed beneath those of Polly Baines, Gerald Alstone and Roberta Tailford-Jones.

Darker Grows the Valley

For Roberta had been enjoying herself thoroughly in print. Posing as a distinguished society leader, she gave interviews and described in a spirited and vivid journalese her reactions to the descent of Polly Baines's corpse from the tree. There was, however, very little of Polly in these narrations and a great deal of Roberta. She hinted that, owing to police incompetence, she felt it as a "sacred debt to society" to take the matter in hand personally, and threw out a few dark remarks about "suspicions which I do not yet feel justified in bringing to the public's notice." Which, I supposed, meant me, although at that stage she did not actually have the effrontery to name names.

But for all this sensationalism, the papers had nothing really tangible to offer. Only a percentage of the actual evidence was published. The real causes of Polly's death were wisely withheld, and a general statement was issued to the press to the effect that she had been shot and hoisted dead into the tree, and that five bullets had been taken from her body. The loss of Mr. Alstone's setter, too, was kept quiet, and, in every way, Bracegirdle acted with dignity and discretion. He stated time and time again that full precautions were being taken to prevent any further outrages, and that everything was being done that could throw light upon the identity of the murderer.

Darker Grows the Valley

During the bad weather work was very heavy at the hospital, but I found my mind constantly returning to Grindle and the unpleasant phase through which it was passing. I bought all the latest editions, skimming through the padded columns and amusing myself with such passages as:

“Dr. Swanson, the famous experimental scientist, was interviewed to-day in his town apartment, whither he has fled to escape the menace of the unknown horror. He expressed the opinion that this case provides one of the most interesting psychological problems that the world has ever known. . . .”

My “town apartment” was a small room in the medical building, and the paragraph was the outcome of a brief conversation with an unavoidable blonde, during the course of which I had remarked that I remained at hospital because I just could not take the daily drive in the snow, and that the murderer was obviously a psychopathic case. But by then we were all newspaper fodder and had no life to call our own. I had less reason to object than Toni, who was referred to as “the grim-lipped, handsome surgeon who preserved a steadfast silence when approached by our special correspondent.”

If there is one thing that any self-respecting pathologist resents, it is to be called a surgeon.

Darker Grows the Valley

Toni's comments were acid.

"Why not a chiropractor and have done with it?"

That was in one of his lighter moments. For ever since our removal to Rhodes, he had been acting very curiously. I felt more and more strongly that he knew something which he intended to keep to himself—something which made him avoid being alone with me, and parry any attempt to discuss the affair. I have always believed in respecting other people's moods and did nothing to discover what it was that caused his reticence, but I found myself constantly involved in conversations which seemed to have some implication that I could not grasp. Luckily for my peace of mind, I was too busy—or too stupid—to work out its real significance.

During the week I paid frequent visits to Peter Foote in his private room at the hospital. In the past I had only known him as one of the more promising students in my class; now I discovered that he had surprisingly good sense and a wide knowledge of subjects outside medicine—a most unusual attribute in a medical student. The first shock was over now and he seemed eager to talk about Gerald and to elaborate a theory he had evolved.

"I know I haven't much to back me up," he said, leaning forward, his dark eyes strained and restless, "but I can't believe anything's happened to Gerald."

Darker Grows the Valley

Up till now the murderer's been a very sensible person—and a very sound psychologist. He's deliberately chosen his victims among the sort of people who don't get much attention from the public or the newspapers. Polly Baines, Jo Baines, even a few more Baineses might have been killed without the whole force of the police stirring and setting about it. But once you start doing away with the grandson of a rich and famous person, you're asking for trouble. Every eye in the nation is on Grindle; everything that money can buy has been put into the case. The murderer's chances of escape are small—and what's probably worse from his point of view, it's practically impossible for him now to indulge the impulse to kill when it comes on him." He thumped the bedclothes with his fist. "Don't you see? He can't have been such a *fool* as to bring this on himself!"

"Very ingenious!" I murmured, pulling a grape from an expensive-looking plate of fruit beside the bed. "And I agree with you up to a point. From now on it's going to be very difficult for the murderer to make a killing. But isn't it extremely unlikely that Gerald should happen to disappear at the right moment?"

"Not if you know him. He's been my best friend ever since I came to college, and I suppose I understand him better than anyone else does. Now this

Darker Grows the Valley

is in confidence"—he lowered his voice—"but I've known for some time that he's been wanting to get away from Grindle. He's scared stiff of old Seymour. Hates him. And not only that, he's terrified of failing in medical school. A short time back he had quite a scene with his grandfather about the low grades he was making. After it was over he told me he couldn't stick it out any longer. Swore he'd clear off, but I managed to talk him out of it. Now, supposing he'd been in one of those moods on the night you found Polly Baines. He's a mild guy and rather nervous, as you know. Seeing that body drop from the tree might quite well have been the last straw. He could easily figure out that if he were to disappear then, everyone would think he had gone the same way as Polly."

"I see what you mean," I broke in. "Seymour would search for his body, but wouldn't think of searching for him. It was a pretty good moment for a get-away."

"Sure, Dr. Swanson"—Peter's youthful passion for theorizing was well under way—"and I was laid up with a broken leg, God damn it. I wasn't on the spot to stop him. Now, you remember that 'phone call that came through for me the night he disappeared? I'm sure it was from Gerald, telling me what he was going to do. If only I could have spoken to him, I could have done something."

Darker Grows the Valley

I leant forward in interest.

“ Well, supposing you’re right, Peter, where would he have gone? ”

“ Have they interviewed his mother? ”

“ You don’t think he was with her! ”

Peter shook his head.

“ No, I’m afraid it won’t be as easy as that. Still, he might have got some money from her. His father gives him a very small allowance, you know.”

“ Is Mrs. Alstone wealthy? ”

“ She gets quite a large sum in alimony from Franklin, I believe. She’s not the sort to be generous, but she might have done it to spite the old man. She hates Seymour for having come between her and her husband.” Peter lit a cigarette, and I noticed that his fingers were trembling with eagerness. “ Has Bracegirdle checked up on all the outgoing boats? ”

“ Of course they’ve done all the routine things.”

“ Gerald was always mad keen to travel. Seymour kept him stuffed up in Grindle all his life. I sometimes used to tell him about the places I’d been to and he was just crazy to see them for himself.” Peter stared at me fiercely. “ If only the police had had some sense, I’m sure they’d have found him at one of the ports.”

“ It’s easy enough to criticize the police, and I hope you’re right,” I said, straightening the bed-

Darker Grows the Valley

clothes which had slipped away from the cast, "but aren't you forgetting the two most significant points?"

"You mean the gun-room and Mrs. Baines's story? In a sense they are difficult to explain, of course, but they can be fitted in from the psychological angle. You see, Gerald's the most thorough person I know. Once he'd made up his mind to disappear, or rather, to pretend to be murdered, he wouldn't be satisfied with leaving it all to chance. I believe he staged the gun-room scene just to make it more convincing. Chairs and tables upset, guns out of place, a revolver missing; it's too obviously an encounter with a homicidal maniac to be the real thing."

"And the blood on the floor?" I asked.

"Just the finishing touches. Of course, I don't know exactly how he managed it—but it's not too difficult to get blood with all those chickens around. It's the blood on the door handle more than anything else that makes me believe it was a put-up job. The murderer himself doesn't seem to run to anything so crude. He gets them out of doors, strings them behind a car and——"

"Strings them behind a car—exactly," I put in. "How about the car Mrs. Baines saw? How about the trail of blood under the covered bridge?"

"Oh, that's another matter." Peter stubbed his

Darker Grows the Valley

cigarette and his voice rose excitedly. "You may think this is far-fetched, but I believe these things are much more likely to be far-fetched than the police make out. I believe Mrs. Baines's story. But I *don't* believe it was Gerald she saw."

"So you suppose there's still another corpse in the neighbourhood?"

"No, I expect it was a sheep or a dog. You see, I've been doing quite a lot of thinking while I've been lying here, and I've a theory about the murderer, too."

I smiled.

"Let's hear it," I remarked.

"Well, I think that there's always some reason for the fit of homicidal mania coming on him—some external irritant. I think that the murderer was on the coon-hunt; saw Polly Baines's body discovered; and then the actual sight of one of his victims started the old blood lust in him. So you see—it wasn't just chance that the car Mrs. Baines saw and Gerald's disappearance coincided. They were both motivated by the same thing—the discovery of Polly Baines."

"You've been reading the text-books, Peter," I said, glancing at the table where several manuals on psychiatry and morbid psychology were heaped among his favourite travel-books.

As I turned I noticed Toni standing with his

Darker Grows the Valley

back to the door, flipping over the leaves of *Cannibal Quest*.

"So you're interested in the psychological aspect of this case, Foote." He was speaking to Peter, but his eyes, strangely enough, were fixed on my face. "So am I."

For a moment none of us spoke, then Toni continued:

"I see this book's about the East Indies. Ever been there?"

Peter smiled.

"Yes, twice. Once in Borneo. Once in New Guinea. Wish I was there now, out of this damn snow."

"Must be interesting." Toni turned over a page casually. "I've always wanted to study primitive sociology. You must take me there some time," he added, grinning, "and show me the ropes."

The conversation then became strictly medical. The cast was to come off Peter's leg that night, and the next day he would be able to place his foot on the ground. The fracture had united beautifully.

As I left, I laughingly told Peter that I would speak to Bracegirdle about his suggestions.

And I was destined to see the sheriff's deputy sooner than I had anticipated. The next day I had just come in from buying an evening paper and was looking at the headlines. At first I could hardly

Darker Grows the Valley

believe what I read. Scrawled across the top in heavy black letters were the words:

LAST WIND-UP IN GRINDLE VALLEY MANIAC TRAPPED BY POLICE

From our special correspondent comes the sensational news that Mark Baines, part-time gardener and son of Jo Baines, one of the victims, has been arrested by the Rhodes police to-day in connection with the death of his father and little sister, and the disappearance of Gerald Alstone. There are also additional charges for torturing and slaying several animals, including Mrs. Tailford-Jones's marmoset. Our readers will recall how, in her last article in this paper, Mrs. Tailford-Jones hinted that such a result might be expected. . . .

It went on to give a lurid pen-portrait of poor Mark and his curious mode of living, explaining also how he had had no alibi for any of the times of the murders, and how he had already been charged with hurting two little girls several months earlier. As I read this, I recalled how Valerie and I had come across him on the night of the coon-hunt. Things looked pretty tough for him, although I was convinced he had nothing to do with the affair. I was angry, too, with Bracegirdle for arresting him without, as I felt sure, sufficient evidence. It was with relief that I remembered Mr. Foote's \$1,000 cheque

Darker Grows the Valley

which still reposed in my pocket book. At least it would help Mark to get good legal advice.

Throwing down the paper, I called up Bracegirdle. I was told he was not in his office, and, what was more, he was actually on his way to the college. About ten minutes later he arrived, looking very much the worse for wear. He accepted a drink with gratitude and, sinking down on my narrow bed, threw his legs up on a chair.

“What’s this about Mark?” I asked. “You don’t think he did it, do you?”

“Wel-l, Doctor”—Bracegirdle smiled wearily—“I’m ready to believe anything. He’s as likely as anyone else. His alibis are utterly vague, and Hall *did* see him hanging around the Alstones’ house the night Gerald disappeared.”

“Is that all?”

“There’s certain other things against him. He’s queer—just the sort that might go hay-wire. Besides, he obviously knows something.”

“What d’you mean?”

“He’s been holding out on us ever since the arrest. In my job you get used to telling whether a man’s coming clean or not.”

“But surely that’s not enough to justify a warrant!”

“He ought to be grateful it is,” said Bracegirdle grimly. “If we hadn’t shut him up when we did,

Darker Grows the Valley

there's no telling what might have happened to him."

"What on God's earth are you driving at?"

"Just what I say. Of course, you've been out of the valley for several days now. You don't know what things are like down there. But believe me, it's getting more and more like hell every day. The whole countryside is hysterical, and now that Mrs. Tailford-Jones has started acting this way——"

"What's Roberta been up to now?"

"Don't you read the papers? In her clean-up of the valley she picked on Mark, and made things so hot for him that, if we'd been a bit farther south, he'd had been lynched by now. That's one of the reasons why we arrested him."

I whistled.

"God, what a woman! I've a good mind to spill a few pornographical beans about her."

"I should be a bit careful." Bracegirdle was watching me shrewdly. "Mrs. Tailford-Jones has also stated that Mark had a confederate. Of course, I'm not suggesting anything, but in public I should pipe down on that sympathy for Mark if I were you."

"So dear Roberta's still getting at me." I crossed to the table and took a cigarette. "Nothing else's happened, I suppose."

"Nothing important. Mr. Alstone has put up a

Darker Grows the Valley

\$5,000 reward for the recovery of his grandson, dead or alive. Incidentally, this came for him in the morning mail."

Bracegirdle fumbled in his pocket and handed me an envelope. It had a Grindle postmark and contained a sheet of ordinary white paper on which was typed the following unsigned note:

Now you are getting the kind of treatment which you have shown to other people and which you so richly deserve. You think you can buy yourself out of it, don't you—just as you've always been able to buy yourself out of things in the past? Well, this is one thing that all your money won't pay for. I hope you're enjoying it.

I handed it back to the deputy.

"At least Mark couldn't have written that," I commented. "What do you make of it?"

"When things are in this state," he replied, "I don't take much stock by anonymous letters, but—you never know. Have to look into them just as a matter of routine."

"Talking about a matter of routine," I replied, "a most unpleasant individual wrested my finger-prints from me this morning. Am I under suspicion?"

Bracegirdle smiled. "I'm having everyone in the valley done, Dr. Swanson. We might get something out of it. There are those finger-prints on the gun-

Darker Grows the Valley

room door to check up on, you know. That's the only thing we can do until the snow melts. It's no good digging blindly for the body, and bloodhounds are useless."

"Any help from the neighbours? "

Bracegirdle frowned.

"I've given up expecting any help. They don't even seem able to produce half-way decent alibis. At the best of times they've only one other person's word to back them up. In my opinion they've all got something to hide. But I can't very well arrest the lot of them!" He swallowed the remnants of his highball and set down the empty glass. "We won't get any farther until we find the body."

"Peter Foote doesn't think he's dead," I remarked, and went on to tell him what Peter had said the day before.

The deputy listened patiently.

"If it interests the young man," he said at length, "you might tell him we've done everything he suggested—with no result. The ports have been watched. The blood on the bridge has been analysed. I interviewed Mrs. Franklin Alstone yesterday——"

"What sort of a woman is she? "

"Might have been pretty once. You can't tell through the paint."

"Any use? "

Darker Grows the Valley

He shook his head.

"She hadn't seen her dear, darling boy for months. Spent about half an hour telling me what a wicked man Mr. Alstone was, and how he had ruined her life. She was positive about Gerald, though. He didn't go to her."

"Did he have any other friends? "

"None that I can locate."

"So you don't think he's alive? "

Bracegirdle grunted.

"He's dead all right, whatever Mr. Foote or any other young Philo Vance may say."

That same evening I went to visit Mark in the City Hall. I did my best to get him to talk, but he no longer appeared to have confidence in me. He sat staring moodily at the floor of his cell, and all I could extract from him was a few non-committal monosyllables. Although I felt I knew him well enough to be convinced of his fundamental innocence, I had to admit that he seemed to be holding something back. He appeared unable to grasp the fact that Peter's father had given him \$1,000. He steadfastly refused to accept the cheque, and also turned a deaf ear to my suggestions for legal assistance. The fate of his animals and flowers alone interested him.

In the light of his silence, I realized that things looked pretty bad for him. The public had eagerly

Darker Grows the Valley

adopted him as a peg on which to hang their vague suspicions and fears. And the fact that no sort of atrocity had been attempted since his apprehension inclined even the more sane members of the community to think the worst.

Nevertheless, his arrest had done little to restore confidence in the valley itself. One day the Goschens suddenly migrated to an apartment in town, where, as Millie put it over the 'phone, the kids were more likely to "remain alive." They told me that there was no child or animal to be seen in Grindle. The police had issued orders for them all to be kept under lock and key. I had not realized that the affair had reached such a pitch.

When I was beginning to believe that no further complications would arise, I received a letter. It had a Grindle postmark, and was typewritten on ordinary white paper, similar to that of the other anonymous epistle.

It read:

It isn't only in hospitals that animals are tortured, is it? It isn't only for "humanity" that children and harmless creatures are slaughtered. You thought you had the monopoly of it, didn't you? Maybe you're right!

I read this peculiar document and handed it over to Toni, who had just come in.

Darker Grows the Valley

He returned it with a smile.

“ Well, well, Doug,” he said slowly, “ that is unexpected, isn’t it? ”

There was something about his smile that I did not understand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AFTER ten days or so the weather changed. On Friday morning I awoke feeling heavy and unrested. The air from the open window was warm, and I noticed that the iron-hard piles of snow, lying along the street, had sagged during the night. December seemed to be going in for extremes that year. By noon dirty runnels of water were pouring down the gutters, and there were no more raccoon coats or red noses to be seen on the campus at Rhodes.

At the hospital I ran into Peter Foote, who, with the aid of a crutch, was now able to attend most of his classes. On hearing that Toni and I planned to return to Grindle that evening, he asked for a lift. He wanted to see Mr. Alstone, he explained, and to become officially enlisted in the search for Gerald.

It was late afternoon when the three of us arrived in the valley. I shall never forget the curious sensation of apprehension and excitement I experienced as we drove by Grindle Oak. I think the others, too, felt as I did. None of us spoke, yet our silence was more eloquent than words.

Darker Grows the Valley

As we helped Peter out on to the Alstones' porch, Franklin was standing there alone staring over the snow. It was difficult to realize that this was the father of the boy whose disappearance had aroused such a nation-wide indignation. He seemed so slight and shadowy a figure—one not designed to play a conspicuous rôle in life. How had this affair affected him? I wondered. Did he worry about his missing son? Did he seem as insignificant to himself as he did to the newspaper reporters, who had completely overlooked him in favour of his aggressive parent?

He listened in silence to Peter's request to be allowed to help in the search for Gerald.

"Very kind, very kind indeed," he said at last. "We must ask Father."

My first task, after our reunion with the delighted Lucinda, was to see Mrs. Baines and present her with the thousand dollars. She was up and about when I reached the cottage. I found her peeling potatoes, surrounded with a mob of querulous children. I told her of Mr. Foote's action and handed her the cheque. She accepted it without gratitude or enthusiasm, muttering that it would come in handy now that there was no man about the house. Her mind was obviously elsewhere, and she kept glancing out of the window across the snow which still glowed dimly in the fading light. I supposed that, like all

Darker Grows the Valley

the other inhabitants of the valley, she was dreading the thaw—dreading what might happen now the snow was melting and Grindle would once again be naked and exposed to attack.

On the way home I made a detour, strolling up the lane which leads to the Lampson road. It was strange to see the Goschens' house lying there dark and deserted after the blaze of light which had always been wont to greet the passer-by. The Tailford-Joneses, however, still expended the usual amount of electricity. There was a light in almost every window, and I could see Roberta moving about in the living-room. For a moment she absorbed my attention, and I did not notice Edgar standing by the gate.

"So you're back with us, Dr. Swanson." His voice was quiet and low.

"Oh, good evening, I didn't see you."

"People sometimes don't." The little colonel tapped his fingers gently on the wood of the gate. "Well, the snow will soon be gone."

"Yes, it's been a foul month, hasn't it? "

Edgar leant over the gate, and in the light from the house I could see he was smiling.

"Very unpleasant, Doctor. I wonder what January has in store for us."

There was a tone in his voice which was difficult to interpret.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Don’t let’s talk about next month, yet,” I said with a heavy attempt at joculariry. “There’s Christmas to come first.”

“Christmas! Ah, yes!” Mr. Tailford-Jones seemed to be musing over the implications of the word. “‘Peace on earth and good will toward men,’ isn’t it? Very suitable. Good night, Dr. Swanson.”

He turned, and I saw his diminutive figure pattering up the path to the house.

When I got home I found Toni entertaining Valerie and Mrs. Middleton in the living-room. The sight of Valerie made me realize how much I had been missing her.

“Hello, Doug,” she said, smiling. “It’s good to have you back.”

“Yes”—Mrs. Middleton’s little blue eyes were regarding me solemnly—“now the Goschens have gone, you are the only friends we have in the valley. We must all cling together in times like these.”

Toni brought me a drink. “They say things have been pretty tough here in our absence.”

“We’ve all had our finger-prints taken,” put in Valerie. “And we’re not supposed to go out after dark. There are policemen all over the place who ask you where you’re going and what you intend to do. We haven’t been allowed to take Sancho out

Darker Grows the Valley

for days." Her eyes softened as she spoke. "He's much better, by the way, and roaring for exercise!"

Mrs. Middleton moved uneasily and shot a glance at the window.

"The police may do all they can," she said, "but they can't stop things happening. We've not seen the end of it yet. The snow is going, and when it's gone——"

"Oh, mother, let's not be gruesome to-night! I want to enjoy myself." Valerie crossed to the piano and began to play.

From then on, despite Mrs. Middleton, the shadow of death slipped temporarily into the background. It was not until our guests were leaving that our strange position was brought back to us.

We were all standing by the garden gate when we heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and a flash-lamp was shone on us.

"Those ladies can't go out alone," said a gruff voice. "Is one of you gentlemen escorting them?"

"Yes, officer," replied Toni. "I am."

"All right, brother, but you'd better take a torch."

The policeman moved on, swinging his flash-lamp from side to side as he went.

Soon after the others had left, the telephone rang. It was Peter Foote calling from the Alstones'. His voice was high-pitched and excited.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Hello! Dr. Swanson? Have you heard the news? Mark's escaped!"

"Escaped!"

"Yes. Sometime this evening. Bracegirdle's just 'phoned Mr. Alstone. He's coming right over from Rhodes with an armed squad."

"How did it happen?"

"Don't know exactly."

"Any idea where he's gone?"

"Bracegirdle seems to think he's headed in this direction. Nothing definite, though. I rather hope he makes a getaway. I owe him a lot."

As he spoke, an idea flashed through my mind, an idea which called for quick action.

"Listen, Peter," I said, "will you do me a favour? Keep Bracegirdle occupied for a few minutes when he comes. Fake some story—do anything, but don't let them go after Mark just yet. I think I know where he is, and I don't want that armed squad turned loose on him if I can help it. Give me a quarter of an hour. That's all I want."

"O.K., Doctor, anything you say! But snap into it. I've a feeling they'll be right over."

I threw down the receiver and dashed out into the lane. In front I could still see the flickering light of the policeman's torch, but I hurried on, pushing past him with a curt good night.

He shot the flash-lamp up into my face.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Hey, there, what are you up to? ”

“ It’s only Dr. Swanson,” I shouted, and ran on.

I could hear him starting after me. Then his footsteps ceased. He had, I supposed, decided I was above suspicion.

It was a dark night, and the ground was slushy. Before me loomed the covered bridge. I crossed it and hurried on towards the Baines’s cottage.

The windows were curtained and unlighted. Keeping close to the wall, I made for the old stable and pushed at the door. It was open. Inside the darkness was intense. I groped my way forward, and stumbled over something hard. Quickly I struck a match, and in the fitful illumination I saw it was an empty cage. The others were empty, too. Someone had let the animals loose.

“ Mark! ” I whispered.

There was no answer.

I called again and, reaching the ladder, swung myself up into the loft.

“ It’s Dr. Swanson, Mark. Don’t be afraid.”

As I felt round the wall, my face brushed against something soft, and the heavy scent of flowers suddenly invaded my nostrils.

“ Are you there, Mark? ”

I could distinctly hear the sound of someone breathing. I could feel, too, that someone was watching me. It had always been a notion of

Darker Grows the Valley

mine that Mark could see in the dark, and now I half expected his eyes to gleam in the obscurity—luminous as a cat's. I moved slowly forward, my hands stretched out to guide me. Then I bumped against the foot of the bed, and my fingers touched the rough material of a man's coat.

"Mark, why didn't you answer me?"

I produced a match-box and lit one of the candles which I knew to be by the bedside.

He was sitting upright, his eyes staring blankly into mine.

"How on earth did you get here?" I asked.

"Saw my chance and jumped a truck."

"But why, Mark? What good will it do you? They'd shoot if they saw you."

"I had to come back and see them animals was all right, hadn't I? Tommy's just a kid. He doesn't know how to look after 'em good."

"So you broke jail just for that?"

"I turned 'em loose. They're better outside now the snow's gone than cooped up here with me away."

"Listen, Mark. The police will be here any minute. You're going back with them, aren't you?"

"It's all right now them animals is gone. Tommy knows how to water the plants."

He rose and started to move round the room, fingering the leaves and the blossoms.

Darker Grows the Valley

I followed. It was like dealing with a child.

“When the police come——”

“Police!” His mouth broke into a sudden smile. “I could tell them a thing or two if I wanted. But what’s the use? They wouldn’t understand. They ain’t got no sense!”

I put a hand on his arm.

“You know something about the murders, don’t you, Mark? Why don’t you tell me?”

He did not reply, and, in the candlelight, I saw that his eyes had once more assumed a vague, far-away expression.

As we stood there in silence, I heard a car grind to a stop outside in the road.

“That’s the police now, Mark. You stay here and promise me not to move. Those cops are quick on the trigger. They’ll shoot if you try a get-away.”

Obediently he crossed and sat down on the bed.

Below there were shouts and the sound of heavy footsteps. Hurrying down the ladder, I stumbled to the door and swung it back. The strip of lawn leading up to the cottage was dark with shadowy forms. As soon as the door opened they seemed to tense. If I had been able to see, I know I would have been looking down the barrels of some fifteen revolvers.

“Is Bracegirdle there?” I called.

One of the men detached himself from the crowd.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Dr. Swanson!” The deputy’s voice was hoarse with surprise. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Just seeing nothing happens to Mark. He’s in there, waiting. I’ll go up with you. You don’t need your regiment.”

He followed me into the barn, and I told him in a few words why Mark had run away.

“Listen, Bracegirdle,” I said, and for the first time since the beginning of the case, I put what little authority I possessed into my voice. “I think you respect me as much as I respect you. We are friends, and I have never before criticized anything you’ve done in connection with this business. But I want to tell you right here and now that you’re making a big mistake in believing Mark has anything to do with these murders. He’s just a kid and innocent as a lamb!”

Bracegirdle’s face was close to mine. In the darkness I could hear his quiet, regular breathing.

“Maybe you’re right, Dr. Swanson,” he said slowly, “and maybe you’re wrong. But, murderer or no murderer, that boy knows something, and it’s my duty to find out what it is. I can understand how you feel. You know him. You’re fond of him, but——”

“But, nothing!” I said. “I’m a doctor, and I know that if he’s treated to any more of this stuff,

Darker Grows the Valley

he'll lose what little wits he has left. He may have seen something; he may even have seen one of the murders committed. Well and good, but you're not going to get it out of him by locking him up. The only way to make him tell is to get him to trust you."

"O.K., Doctor. No one's going to treat him rough. Come on, we'd better fetch him."

Mark rose as we entered the loft. Without a word he pushed past us and started down the ladder. At the foot he stood waiting patiently for us to descend. The sight of the squad of policemen on the lawn seemed to have no effect on him. He closed the stable door carefully after us and let himself be conducted to the car.

As they drove off, he turned and smiled at me.

"The plants will be all right," I called. "I'll see Tommy looks after them—good."

The next morning over breakfast, I told Toni all that had happened. He listened in silence, gazing out across the lawn, where now there were only a few dirty brown heaps to mark where the snow had been.

When I had finished, he took a piece of toast and buttered it slowly.

"Do you know what Mark's holding back from the police?" he asked.

Darker Grows the Valley

"No, I don't. Maybe it's something important. Maybe it's just something he imagined. You can't tell with Mark."

"He's never talked to you—not even before he was arrested?"

"Never said a damn thing," I replied rather irritably. "You know as much about it as I do."

Toni smiled the curious smile which he had adopted of late.

"That's just exactly what I was thinking, Doug. Pass me the marmalade."

For a few moments we ate in silence. Then I happened to look up and noticed Valerie on Esmeralda riding down the lane outside the window. She waved and pointed up our drive, indicating that she was coming in.

I nodded my head and waved back.

"She's up early," I remarked, as I swallowed the last drops of my coffee. "Expect she's glad to be able to ride again. Charlie wants his horses exercised, by the way."

Toni grunted and lit a cigarette.

"I'll go and let her in," I said.

"If you're going out into the garden," he called, as I strolled into the hall, "you might as well close the garage. I think I left it open last night."

I lingered a few moments at the front door, wait-

Darker Grows the Valley

ing for Valerie to tether Esmeralda. She seemed to be taking her time, and I was just about to investigate when she ran up. Although she had seemed gay and debonair when she passed the window a little while before, I could tell at once that in the interval something terrible must have happened. Her face was deathly pale. Her lips were white. In her hand she held a short piece of rope.

She thrust it towards me and stood staring into my eyes.

"Here, Doug," she whispered, and her voice was hoarse and unnatural. "You know what to do with this."

Before I could open my mouth to question her, she had brushed past into the dining-room.

I fingered the length of rope foolishly. It was very light, not much thicker than sash-cord. One end was frayed and it was knotted and stained a dirty brown. I gazed at it in complete bewilderment and then, stuffing it in my pocket, I hurried after Valerie.

She was standing by the window, talking to Toni, and there was an expression on her face I had never seen before. For the first time I realized that she could look hard-boiled.

"Nice to have the snow gone, isn't it, Toni?" she was saying.

Darker Grows the Valley

He offered her a cup of coffee, but she shook her head.

"By the way, how much is the reward for finding Gerald?" she continued slowly. "Five thousand dollars, isn't it?"

We both nodded, staring at her stupidly.

"I suppose you're going to claim it, aren't you?"

Toni got up.

"What on earth are you driving at, Valerie?"

"So you don't know where he is?"

"Naturally not."

"Well, then, I suppose I shall have to tell you."

She turned and stared me straight in the eyes.

"I've just found him. He's lying out there in your back-yard—not five feet from the garage door."

CHAPTER TWELVE

WE stared at her in utter incredulity.

"I just don't believe it," I said at last.

"See for yourself."

Valerie turned abruptly to the door, and we followed her round the house to the patch of ground in front of the garage. There, wedged between a pile of rubbish and the little wall which skirted the yard, lay a body. It was half embedded in the drift of dirty snow which still clung around the foot of the wall, and it had obviously been there for some time. I bent down and peered at the face.

Unquestionably it was Gerald Alstone.

"My God!" I exclaimed. "He must have been there ever since it started snowing."

Valerie's eyes held mine in a long, level gaze.

"Yes," she said. "Ever since the coon-hunt—and you didn't know anything about it!"

I joined Toni in a cursory examination. The body was in an excellent state of preservation despite the fact that Gerald had probably been dead for

Darker Grows the Valley

almost a fortnight. The shroud of snow must have arrested all traces of decomposition. The mouth was twisted in a strange, ironical smile, and the eyes protruded as though the boy had been under the stress of some strong emotion at the time of death. Toni was gingerly lifting the head, which had been frozen into the hard mud at an unnatural and very ugly angle.

“Hm!” he murmured. “Look at that mess!”

On the right side of the head was a gaping hole, round which one could make out dried fibres of sinew and brain.

“Shot!” I exclaimed. “Clean through the skull.”

Toni, who seemed to be unconscious of Valerie’s presence, had pulled a small magnifying-glass from his pocket and was examining the edges of the wound.

“Pretty close range,” he muttered. “Our friend was a bit more humane this time.” He looked up at me, a strange smile in his eyes; then he started to inspect the wrists and ankles of the dead boy.

“Any funny business?” I asked.

“What do you make of *this*?”

As he spoke, Toni lifted the left leg of the body. There, twisted round the ankle, was a piece of blood-stained rope. The replica, I noticed with a sudden stab of apprehension, of the fragment just handed

Darker Grows the Valley

me by Valerie. My eyes swiftly turned to the garage, which lay open, revealing the broad backs of the two Plymouths; then they moved to Valerie, who was standing motionless, her lips tight closed. Could she have found that piece of rope attached to Toni's car? Had she given it to me because she wanted to protect him? Whole vistas of strange, unbelievable suspicions opened up in my mind.

"Look at the clothes, Doug." Toni was speaking again. "Same old story. Ripped to pieces. Those scratches, too. Our murderer seems to be very regular in his habits. Only this time, he had his little joy-ride with a corpse."

"A corpse!" broke in Valerie. "So Gerald was dead when—he was dragged along!"

"Looks that way. Can't swear to it."

"Thank God!" She gave a sigh of relief and closed her eyes.

I was the first to ask the obvious question.

"How on earth did he get here?" I exclaimed fatuously.

Of course no one replied. For a full minute, it seemed, the three of us stood there like dummies. It was Valerie who broke the silence.

"Hadn't someone better call Bracegirdle?" she suggested.

I hurried to the house and, having told the deputy of the discovery, rejoined the others in the yard.

Darker Grows the Valley

“He’s coming right over,” I said. “Told me not to touch anything.”

If the whole affair had not been so tragic, there would have been something almost ludicrous in the picture of us solemnly standing by the rubbish-heap in our own back-yard, staring down at the body for which so long and exhaustive a search had been made all over the country.

“Mother said that when the snow was gone something would happen,” said Valerie with a shudder. “I never thought it would be—as bad as this.”

The silence that followed this remark was tense. I felt an almost overwhelming desire to break it—to try and bring the three of us back into the realms of normal, commonplace life.

“You’ll get the reward, Valerie,” I said, striving to be casual. “Five thousand’s a nice bit of money.”

“Very nice!” Her tone was too calm to be healthy. “All the same, he was my cousin, you know. And now, if you don’t mind, I’ll go into the house. I believe I’m going to be sick.”

Declining my offer to accompany her, she hurried away.

Strangely enough, it was with palpable relief that, a short time later, I saw the police car draw up outside the gate. Bracegirdle hurried towards us with the coroner and a small group of policemen.

Darker Grows the Valley

He was as businesslike and unmoved as ever. Realizing, perhaps, how potentially awkward the situation was for us, he did his best to give the investigation a flat, impersonal quality. While the coroner was making his examination, I took the sheriff's deputy into the house to interview Valerie. He asked the bare minimum of questions and then told her she could go home if she liked, but must hold herself in readiness to testify officially to the finding of Gerald Alstone.

After Valerie had taken her leave, Bracegirdle and I returned to the garage. I noticed that a second car had driven up. The coroner had finished his examination and was talking with the district attorney and an old, white-haired man whom I recognized as the sheriff himself. The deputy approached them, and for a few minutes the four officials conversed together. Then Bracegirdle and his men began a thorough search of the yard.

Throughout the procedure he made no reference to the strange fact that the corpse had been found in our garden, but every now and then I noticed his eyes travelling to the open garage and then back to the body. His conclusions were obvious.

A short time later the "dead-cart" appeared from Rhodes. By now, I reflected grimly, I was getting quite well informed in police technique. Gerald

Darker Grows the Valley

was carefully extricated from the narrow space behind the rubbish-heap and carried to the hearse.

"I'll have to ask a few more questions later on, Dr. Swanson," Bracegirdle was saying, "but I needn't bother just now. I'm leaving several men here, and the yard will be roped off. I'm afraid you won't be able to use your cars to-day."

He joined the sheriff, the coroner and the district attorney and started to move down the drive. Toni and I followed.

At the gate, Toni turned to the coroner.

"I'll come down with you to the morgue if I may, Doctor," he said. "There's usually something for me to do, and Brooks and I often work together."

The coroner flashed a look at the sheriff, then at the deputy.

"If you don't mind, Dr. Conti," broke in Bracegirdle quickly, "I think Dr. Brooks had better see to this matter alone. In the circumstances——" He paused. "Well, I leave it to your own good sense, sir."

Toni shrugged his shoulders.

The rest of that Saturday was a nightmare I shall never forget. First of all our garage and yard were roped off and occupied by the police. Being unable to get at our cars, we were virtually prisoners. After mooning about the house for a

Darker Grows the Valley

while, however, Toni managed to escape through the back door and left me alone to face the barrage of photographers, press-men and curious villagers.

By one o'clock the thing must have got into the papers, for all the prurient sightseers of Rhodes and neighbouring towns decided to spend a pleasant Saturday afternoon gaping open-mouthed at the spot where the body was found. The number of cars parked in the lane outside our house suggested a royal reception.

The telephone rang incessantly. "Dr. Swanson, is it true . . . your own back garden? . . . Miss Middleton found the body . . . do tell me if she's really engaged to Dr. Conti." The whole business was becoming insufferable. Finally I appointed Lucinda to play Angel with the Flaming Sword, and, from then on, it was woe betide the hapless reporter or the casual inquirer who tried to crash through either in person or over the wire.

Once and once only did I hear the maid's voice soften. In the late afternoon she had gone to answer the telephone with her customary indignation, but immediately she thawed.

"No, ma'am," she crooned, "he's not here, ma'am. I don't know, ma'am. All right, ma'am."

"Who's that?" I called, as she put down the receiver.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Miss Middleton, sir. Calling Dr. Conti."

Lucinda pushed a beaming face round the door and then hurried off to the kitchen.

For the hundredth time I pulled from my pocket the piece of knotted rope which Valerie had slipped into my hand so furtively that morning. What did it mean? Were those brown stains just dirt—or were they blood? Why had she been so reticent, so evasive in her manner? Could this be the explanation of Toni's strange behaviour since the night of the coon-hunt?

I walked up and down the living-room, racking my brains to find an answer to these questions. At last I could stand it no longer. I called Valerie on the telephone.

Mrs. Middleton's voice informed me—a little sharply—that her daughter was very unwell and could not come to the 'phone. It was obvious that they, too, had had their share of inquisition.

Evening came, and still Toni had not returned. By this time I had started drinking and might have achieved a pleasant state of insensibility had not Lucinda interrupted me by summoning me to a more than usually excellent dinner. I believe that she, sweet soul, was thoroughly enjoying herself. All her protective instincts had been given full rein. Reporters, neighbours, sightseers—all of them had fallen before her resolute defence of the house.

Darker Grows the Valley

Even Bracegirdle, when he finally arrived after dinner, had considerable difficulty in obtaining admission.

I was alone with my coffee when I heard his voice—low and almost apologetic compared with that of the new Lucinda. I jumped up with relief and bade him enter.

The deputy was pale and haggard. The constant strain of the past few weeks, with their sleepless nights and monotonous trail of crimes, was obviously taking its toll of him. I indicated a chair, and, pulling out his inevitable pipe, he sat down heavily.

“Well, Bracegirdle,” I asked, after a few moments of silence, “have you just dropped in for a chat or is there something to tell me?”

The deputy glanced at me and then looked down at his toes.

“The autopsy showed that Gerald Alstone was shot with a .32,” he said slowly. “The same type of gun that was missing from Mr. Alstone’s gun-room. He was, I should say, killed by someone standing close to him. Death was instantaneous. Apart from that we can only guess, but it looks as though he’d been tied on to a car and dragged along for quite a distance. His body was just like Baines’s—all scratches and bruises. Only this time, according to Brooks, he was dead before it happened.”

Darker Grows the Valley

"That's what Toni thought. Pity he isn't here, by the way. He'd be terribly interested."

Bracegirdle cleared his throat.

"Just as well he's not," he remarked suddenly. "I'm in a tough spot, Dr. Swanson, and I've decided that you're the only person who can help and advise me. Ever since you saved Mrs. Bracegirdle's life last spring, I've felt——"

"Can that," I said, laughing, "and have a drink."

Lucinda brought in two enormous mint juleps.

Bracegirdle was fingering his glass as if unwilling to carry it to his lips. "I've got a great respect for you, Dr. Swanson, and you've been very white with me all through this wretched business. That's why"—he broke off and took a long pull at his drink—"that's why I hate to say what I'm going to say."

"Is it something about Mark?"

"No—it's worse." Bracegirdle's tone was deadly serious. "It's Dr. Conti."

I laughed a little louder than was necessary, inwardly praying that my laughter sounded more spontaneous to him than it did to me.

"Why, Bracegirdle, you're crazy with the heat."

"Maybe I am. I hope so. That's why I thought, perhaps—if we talked it over a bit, we might be able to figure out just where I'm wrong. You see,

Darker Grows the Valley

Dr. Swanson, I've always aimed at being a bit different from those policemen you read about in books—and in real life, too—who are pig-headed about their ideas and stick to a pet theory right or wrong. I'm open to correction, but—well, the D.A.'s been hauling me over the coals pretty badly to-day, and they're all clamouring for action."

"Of course, it's tough on you, Bracegirdle, but for God's sake don't go and make a big mistake. Dr. Conti—why, it's fantastic! "

For a moment there was no sound in the living-room except the suction of Bracegirdle's pipe. Outside there was the distant noise of cars and men's deep voices. They reminded me a little grimly that, while we sat and smoked, the machinery of the law was still grinding relentlessly on.

"If I might tell you my reasons, Dr. Swanson——"
His voice was strangely humble.

"Go ahead—only don't expect me to agree with you."

"All right. Now, first of all, let's take the man himself. His father was Italian and, at one time, concerned in quite a bit of political trouble. A headstrong, violent man. Dr. Conti is a scientist, and everyone knows that they're often a bit queer in the head—with all due respect to you."

I smiled.

"Toni's 'queerness' looks like getting him the

Darker Grows the Valley

Nobel prize next year. That is, if his work on carcinomatous tissue—but never mind, go on.”

I drained my glass and yelled out to Lucinda for two more juleps.

“Of course,” the deputy continued, “I don’t make myself out to be one of those new-fangled psychologists, but I believe I’m right in saying that brilliant intellects often go hand in hand with a kind of warped outlook on life——”

“Behaviouristic complex coupled with maladjustment to externals,” I mocked. “Bracegirdle, you’ve been reading Freud!”

“Well, forgetting character and background for the moment”—Bracegirdle’s mouth moved, but his eyes were not smiling—“Dr. Conti is the *only* person, apart from Mark, who has no really satisfactory alibi for any of the times that the outrages were supposed to have been committed. He was out somewhere the night Polly disappeared. No one knows where he was when Baines was killed. He didn’t go on the coon-hunt, and his behaviour that night caused a lot of gossip.”

“That’s nothing,” I said hotly. “Toni can be far ruder than that. And as for alibis, I haven’t got any either. Why not arrest me?”

“Well, do you know where he was, Dr. Swanson? Does he tell you where he goes when he makes off at night?”

Darker Grows the Valley

"Bracegirdle," I said, "Dr. Conti and I are grown men. We're not a couple of schoolgirls. I wouldn't dream of questioning him about his private life any more than he would me."

"But the fact remains that he can't give any very satisfactory answers. Every time I've questioned him, he's been curt and rude. Not at all the attitude of a man who's trying to help the police in the performance of their duty. And since the night we found Polly Baines, he's been even worse. You can't fool me, Dr. Swanson. I know he's holding something back—just the way Mark is!"

All the time Bracegirdle was speaking my mind had been working furiously. After all, there was a great deal of truth in what he said. Toni's night movements had always been sporadic. His treatment of me recently had been decidedly odd. But the idea of Toni deliberately killing animals and murdering little girls was beyond belief. My thoughts raced backward over all the circumstances, and then—suddenly—two facts detached themselves from this doubtful tangle of half-suspicions.

"Aren't you forgetting about the night Mr. Alstone's setter was lost, Bracegirdle? Toni was with me, you know, when we saw that car—and heard the cry of the animal."

The deputy looked at me closely.

"No, I'm not forgetting that, Dr. Swanson, and

Darker Grows the Valley

I'm not forgetting how you told me the first time. If you recall, it was Dr. Conti who drew your attention to the cry—you admitted that you were not at all certain about it yourself. Don't you see that if he was intending to kill that dog later on in the evening, the unlighted car gave him a marvellous chance to establish a phoney alibi. There's a great deal in the power of suggestion."

"Well, there's one suggestion you can't make—that it was Toni whose face we saw at the window, or that it was he who fired the old man's barn."

"I've told you once before that I don't attach any importance to that face at the window stuff. As for the barn, I don't believe for a moment that it was done by the same person who did the other things."

"That's a change in policy, isn't it?" I took a long pull at my mint julep.

"Well, it's like this, Dr. Swanson. Criminals are creatures of habit like you and me. In any chain of murders you usually find that the same little tricks crop up time and time again. It often happens that this repetition is the undoing of the man—like it was in the case of that English fellow who killed all his wives by drowning them in bathtubs. Anyhow, a man who stabs doesn't often shoot—a professional burglar never kills except in self-defence. Our criminal has original ideas of

Darker Grows the Valley

murder. He'd never sink to anything so clean cut as arson."

"Very pretty, Bracegirdle, but who fired the barn then?"

"Between you and me, I think it was one of the villagers. When things go wrong in a community, the simple folk are very apt to blame it on the richest man in the place. Dumb and unreasoning, of course, but Mr. Alstone's none too popular in these parts."

"So you think they were just taking it out of him, eh?"

The deputy nodded.

"Well," I continued, "you may or may not be right, but you haven't yet brought forward a particle of real evidence to show that Toni was mixed up in all this."

Bracegirdle rose to the fireplace and knocked out his pipe.

"I haven't told you everything yet, Dr. Swanson, and when I've finished what I'm going to say, I'm sure you'll agree that I have some grounds to go on. Let's forget the Baineses for a while and confine ourselves to the night of the coon-hunt, which, so we believe at present, was also the night that Gerald Alstone was murdered."

"All right."

"As you know, Dr. Conti did not go on the coon-

Darker Grows the Valley

hunt. The servants' evidence showed that he stuck around the house for a while and then went out. My belief is that he returned to the Alstones' just before Gerald came back from Grindle Meadow. You remember Hall heard the boy talking to someone and didn't know whether or not he was telephoning? Well, we know he did not finish his call to the hospital, so he was probably interrupted by Dr. Conti. Perhaps they had a fight, and Gerald was shot. Dr. Conti carried him out to his car just before the others returned. Then he drove home. Yes, I've checked up on that, too. Your coloured maid says he got back at about eleven-thirty—roughly the time Mrs. Baines saw that car go by."

He paused, but I nodded to him to go on.

"Well, you can imagine how he felt when he put the car away and found the body missing. You yourself have told me that you have to twist and turn to get into that garage of yours. It was quite a logical place for the body to drop off. Remember it was snowing hard and the corpse would have sunk pretty deeply in the drift. He would have been unlikely to have seen it even though it was so close at hand. He couldn't have guessed at what point in the ride home the rope got broken. Anyhow, he realizes he has to give himself an alibi, so he drives back to the Alstones' house and parks his

Darker Grows the Valley

car where it had been before. By this time other cars are milling about and no one notices him."

"But what about Miss Middleton?" I asked. "She was in his car when I went to get mine."

"I checked up on her movements, too. She stayed behind in the house for quite a while after the guests had gone. Then she went out and sat in the car, thinking quite naturally that it had been there all the time. It was a clever trick."

"But where was he all the while she was waiting? Why didn't he show up and take her home?"

"I think I can answer that, too. He was within a few feet of you both. He was doing something which one of my men caught him doing again this morning. He was looking about in the snow for the gun with which he shot Gerald Alstone, and which he had either dropped or thrown away a short time earlier."

"Good God—you mean that someone actually found him there this morning?"

"Yes, Dr. Swanson." The deputy's voice was grave. "And what is more, they found the gun within a few yards of where he had been looking for it—behind the stable where Dr. Conti's car was parked that night."

"The gun!"

"The .32 revolver that was missing from the rack in the gun-room. Mr. Alstone has identified it."

Darker Grows the Valley

Unless I am much mistaken, it is the gun with which Gerald was shot. You see, sir, it was embedded in the snow and we might never have found it except for the thaw—and Dr. Conti.”

“It’s a plant, Bracegirdle. I can’t believe that Toni—there must be some mistake.”

“Well, Doctor, if he didn’t do the shooting, how did he know where to look for the gun? And that’s not all, either. The report of our finger-print man came through to-day, and he found Dr. Conti’s all over the gun-room.”

“That’s nothing. He probably found mine too—and yours.”

“He did.” Bracegirdle’s voice was very low. “But almost all the marks left by Dr. Conti happened to be blood-stained. Why, even on the door handle——”

I jumped from my chair and for a moment Bracegirdle and I looked each other in the eyes. Had it been any other man in the world, I think I might have said things which I would afterwards have regretted. I did not—could not—believe that Toni was guilty, and yet there was something about the deputy—his clear eyes, his calm, unruffled tone—that convinced me in spite of myself. Convinced me, that is, of the reasonableness of his theory. Common sense told me that the prognosis for Toni was decidedly poor. How much worse would it

Darker Grows the Valley

have been had Bracegirdle known about the piece of stained rope which Valerie had handed me that morning, and which still seemed to burn a hole in my pocket!

"Well, Dr. Swanson, now you know all about it, what would you advise? Should I serve my warrant on Dr. Conti as the D.A. suggests?"

"Warrant! You've actually got one with you?"

"Yes, but I don't need to serve it right away. If, for example, you, as a friend of mine, know anything that could prove me wrong, I'd trust you, Dr. Swanson. And I wouldn't blame you if you'd been keeping back any information."

My brain seemed to be reeling. I had been drinking pretty steadily before and since the deputy arrived, and any concrete idea that I might or might not have had was by this time spinning away in fumes of alcohol. One thing was certain, however, I must play for time.

"There's nothing I can tell you now," I said, "but if you'll give me twenty-four hours, I think—perhaps— There are several things that are worrying me, and I might be able to do something when my head's clearer."

Bracegirdle nodded soberly.

"Don't serve that warrant," I went on, "till to-morrow night—say, at ten o'clock. That gives me a whole day. And don't question Dr. Conti

Darker Grows the Valley

any more than you can help. I know him pretty well, and I'm sure there's some reason why he's not being frank. Leave him to me."

"Well, Doctor, the district attorney is getting worried."

"Oh, I'll be responsible for Toni. You said you could trust me."

"I'm not bothered about that, Dr. Swanson. He couldn't get far." Bracegirdle smiled a trifle grimly. "I've been having someone keep an eye on him for the past few days."

He rose to his feet and held out his hand.

I took it—doubtfully.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER Bracegirdle had left, I sat alone in the living-room, wondering—a little drunkenly—what to do. I had twenty-four hours in which to disentangle the web of suspicion that chance had so insidiously wound about Toni. My task seemed as hopeless as it was melodramatic. During the past few weeks I had let myself be swept along in the current of events without troubling to interpret or deduce. I found myself now left stranded with neither theory nor clue. In my talk with Bracegirdle I had told him there were several things that worried me about the case, but it was difficult to put my finger on any one event around which my suspicions could be crystallized. Apart from the piece of rope, there was only one fact I possessed which was unknown to Bracegirdle—our discovery of the parked automobile in which Roberta and her mysterious male friend—later presumed to be Seymour Alstone—had been quarrelling.

This was as good a starting-point as any other.

Darker Grows the Valley

Despite the mint juleps I found, strangely enough, that the snatches of overheard conversation came back to me with singular clearness: "He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him. He's jealous, vindictive." . . . "You know what'll happen if you don't. You're a jelly-fish, a goddam, spineless jelly-fish!" . . . "Of course he's crazy. That's what makes him so dangerous!" It was difficult to make much sense out of these incoherent remarks, but they did have a tendency to prove that Roberta knew something which, so far, she had not divulged to the police. My best bet, I supposed drearily, was to pay a little visit to the resplendent Mrs. Tailford-Jones next morning and tell her bluntly that her rendezvous in the wood had been observed. It was just possible that some sort of a confession could be frightened out of her. At any rate, there would be a certain piquancy in turning the tables upon a person who had been so unscrupulous in her accusations of others.

Though I was up early next morning, Toni was ahead of me. He had gone to Rhodes, leaving a verbal message with Lucinda that he had important work to do at the hospital and was going to beg, borrow or steal a lift.

Glad, in a sense, that he was out of the way, I ate my Sunday breakfast alone and then went off along the dripping lanes in search of Roberta.

Darker Grows the Valley

A disdainful maid showed me into the living-room, where blasts of steam-heat made the atmosphere both unwholesome and uncomfortable. She informed me that Mrs. Tailford-Jones was still dressing. If I would care to wait, however, her mistress would soon be down. I waited half an hour, at the end of which time my temper was none too good. The sight of Roberta herself in a flaming red *peignoir* did not improve matters. She was heavily made-up, and her scarlet, drooping mouth looked like a freshly opened incision.

She was obviously curious to know the reason for my visit. Her slightly protuberant eyes regarded me with a half-hostile, half-contemptuous stare.

"Well, Dr. Swanson," she said, as she draped herself carefully across the settee, "and what can I do for you?"

"A lot," I said tersely.

A look of suspicion crept into her eyes.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I think you know something, and I want you to tell me what it is."

"And since when have you been in a position to order me about?"

I passed a hand through my hair.

"Listen, Mrs. Tailford-Jones," I began patiently. "Things have got to the stage when innocent people are being accused of crimes they could not possibly

Darker Grows the Valley

have committed. I think that you as much as anyone——”

“If you’re referring to that half-wit friend of yours, Mark Baines,” she said acidly, “I’ll tell you right here and now that I think it’s an excellent thing for us all that he’s locked up and out of the way. It was a crying scandal that he was allowed about as long as he was.”

“I didn’t come here to pick a quarrel,” I said, trying to keep my temper. “I came here to ask your co-operation. It is of vital importance that we all get together and thrash this thing out. I think you know something—I may be wrong—but I ask you in all humility to rack your brains and tell me if you know anything that may have some bearing on this case—anything that hasn’t so far been brought to light.”

Roberta lifted her head and straightened the scarlet cushions.

“A very pretty speech, Dr. Swanson! But I still don’t see what you’re driving at. If you’re trying to pump me, however, believe me, you won’t succeed.”

“I’m sorry you’re taking this attitude, Mrs. Tailford-Jones,” I said quietly. “You force me into being unpleasant.”

“I’ve never noticed that you need much forcing.”

“Well, that makes it easier, doesn’t it? It may

Darker Grows the Valley

interest you to know that I saw a car driving across the fields towards the disused road on the night that Mr. Alstone's setter disappeared. I followed it to the crest of the hill." Here I employed theory as fact. "And there I saw it parked in a small wood by the side of the disused road."

Roberta picked up a cigarette.

"Well?"

"Lacking the finer feelings of a gentleman, I listened to a conversation that was going on in that car. I heard one voice only. It was yours."

"Eavesdropping is just the sort of thing you'd expect from someone who spends his life torturing dumb animals," she said with sudden ferocity.

"I hate to have to bring other people into this," I continued, "but Dr. Conti happened to be listening, too. You were talking to a man. And you were having a quarrel. I don't know what it was all about, but I do know that you were in one of the Alstones' cars."

Roberta was obviously becoming uncomfortable under this inquisition. I decided to adopt the well-worn tactics of trying to sting her into admission by some obvious improbability.

"I suspect," I went on mendaciously, "that you were with Gerald that night. I suspect that something happened between you which may be of extreme importance in this case. Gerald was killed,

Darker Grows the Valley

you know, not long after. It would possibly interest the police if I told them what I heard."

Roberta's eyes were blazing. She rose to her feet, crushing the cigarette with a scarlet-nailed finger.

"*Gerald!* You think I was with *Gerald*? That little sissy? You insult me."

"I insult you, as you so quaintly put it, because my friend happens to have a warrant out against him for that 'little sissy's' murder!"

"You're lying!" Roberta's face was the colour of a grave-stone. "You're absolutely crazy!"

"So that interests you, does it?" I said. "Bracegirdle's going to arrest him this evening unless we can produce evidence to prove he's wrong."

Roberta sank back on the settee, this time completely regardless of effect. In the five years of our acquaintance, I had not realized her capable of such emotion. I had certainly never suspected her of having any sentimental feeling for Toni. She had always been at her most alluring with him, but I had supposed the seductive glances and the hand-clingings to be nothing more than an instinctive Roberta reaction to six feet four of he-manhood.

"What have they got against him?" she asked quickly.

"Plenty," I replied. "I can't tell you the actual facts because Bracegirdle told me in confidence—but they've got enough to convict him unless we

Darker Grows the Valley

can find out something new. Now will you tell me why you were in that car? ”

My question seemed to help her recover her poise. She drew herself up and gave me a scornful look.

“ Gerald, indeed! ” she snapped. “ You fool, it was Franklin. That moron has been chasing after me for years. You must be a pretty bum detective if you didn’t realize that the Alstones have five cars.”

“ What were you doing? ”

She adopted an air of injured innocence.

“ It’s no business of yours, but if it helps Toni any—we were having a private chat.”

“ What about? ”

“ About—er—Queenie.”

“ What about Queenie? ”

She threw me a spiteful glance.

“ If you really want to know, I was trying to get Franklin to make Seymour take the whole matter up with the hospital authorities. You know what I think about you, Dr. Swanson, and your habit of murdering animals——”

“ Don’t let’s go into that now,” I interrupted. “ What did Franklin say? ”

“ Oh, just what you’d expect. He’s too darned scared of old Alstone to do anything.”

“ So just for that,” I said, laughing, “ you called him a spineless jelly-fish! ”

Darker Grows the Valley

She shrugged her shoulders and pulled the red *peignoir* more tightly around her.

"And to whom did you refer, Mrs. Tailford-Jones, when you said: 'He's jealous, vindictive. He wouldn't stop at anything if I told him'?"

"If you can't guess, you're more of a fool than I thought you were."

"Well, let's leave it at that. Did you drive to the wood over the fields?"

"Why on earth should we when there's a perfectly good road?"

"What time did you get there?"

"I don't know, but it was quite early."

"Before eleven-thirty?"

"Yes. Edgar left for Lampson at about nine. I guess we must have got there around ten."

"Did you see or hear another car pass close by you at any time during the evening?"

"I don't remember."

"You didn't hear an animal howling?"

"I did not."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"There's another point," I continued, suddenly remembering something Bracegirdle had told me.

"You drove to the Alstones' on the night the barn burned down. You didn't go to the house. Where did you go?"

Darker Grows the Valley

"To see Franklin." The answer was swift.

"Where?"

"In the carpenter's shop."

"About the same business?"

"More or less."

"And that's all you know?"

She turned, her eyes dark with anger.

"Listen, Dr. Swanson. I've stood enough impertinence from you. You come into my house; cross-question me in my own living-room; treat me as though I were a criminal. I won't stand for it any longer, I tell you. You've heard all I know. Now get out!"

But I did not rise.

"Are you sure that is all?" I said quietly. "Remember, if you're holding anything back, you're making it all the worse for Toni."

She got up and started pacing about the room, puffing fiercely at a cigarette. The *peignoir* bellied out behind her like a scarlet spider-web. Her voice, when she spoke, was curiously low.

"I've always disliked you, Dr. Swanson. Don't think I haven't noticed how you've been trying to get Toni away from me and foist him on that moon-faced Middleton girl. You've been fighting pretty hard, haven't you? Well, you won't succeed. And what's more, you can't blame me if I did a bit of fighting back."

Darker Grows the Valley

"Just what do you mean?" I asked, completely at sea.

She came up to me and pressed her heavy face close to mine.

"I sent you that letter," she said. "And I'd do it again. Here you are, acting the little detective—pretending you're just too worked up because your boy friend's in danger. But all the same, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you didn't know more about it than any of us—you and that idiot, Mark Baines!"

She drew away, sending a cloud of blue smoke up into the air.

"So you wrote the anonymous letter!" I exclaimed. "Did you send the one to Alstone as well?"

"Alstone? Which Alstone?" Her mouth hung open in surprise. "I didn't even know there was one."

There was a conviction in her voice which made me incline to believe her.

"Well, that's all," I said, rising. "I'm sorry if I've upset you, Mrs. Tailford-Jones. But it was absolutely necessary. If you should remember anything else, I wish you'd get in touch with me immediately. Bracegirdle's serving the warrant to-night."

She followed me to the door, and I felt her soft hand on my sleeve.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Dr. Swanson!" Her throat was working convulsively. "You must tell me what they've got against Toni. Don't you see? I might be able to help."

I paused, my fingers on the knob.

"Help? How could you help?"

"I don't know, but there's just a chance——" Suddenly she seemed to have become overwhelmed with grief. "I'll do anything to save him. I swear I will. All you've got to do is to tell me!"

"All right."

I returned to my chair and told her some of the less damning evidence against Toni. She listened until I started to speak of his suspicious night-outings and of his complete lack of alibis for the times at which Polly and Jo Baines met their deaths. Then she gave a triumphant laugh and sprang to her feet.

"If that's all they've got against him," she exclaimed, with a strange glint in her eye, "I can tell you where he was on the night Polly Baines disappeared, *and* on the night her father was murdered. He was with me!"

I looked at her in complete amazement.

"You?" I repeated weakly.

"Yes. You never guessed that, did you? You never guessed that all the time you were throwing him on the neck of that Middleton girl that he was

Darker Grows the Valley

coming out to see me. . . .” She stood there a few moments, drawn to her full height. Then she collapsed. Her head drooped and her hands fell limply at her side. “I think I’ll go upstairs and lie down,” she said softly. “You can find your own way out.”

Pulling the scarlet *peignoir* around her, she crossed to the door. Despite my partial scepticism, I could not help feeling a little sorry for her. She looked like a dejected cardinal bird that had been caught in the rain.

As I hurried down the drive my mind was full of Roberta’s sensational confession, which, if true, would help to prove Toni’s innocence with regard to the earlier crimes. But, despite a strong desire, I found it difficult to believe her. She was an hysterical, theatrical woman whose life, lacking inherent reality, was built up around just such dramatics as this. It was possible that she really had worked herself up into an infatuation for Toni. It was possible, too, that he had had some sort of affair with her, though surely—if he cared for Valerie as I believed he did—this must have been a thing of the past. Still, there were several puzzling facts which such a relationship might explain. On the night we had surprised Mrs. Tailford-Jones’s rendezvous with Franklin, Toni had acted in a peculiar fashion. I remembered

Darker Grows the Valley

wondering vaguely at the time whether there had not been something between them. He had seemed irritated and almost jealous to find Roberta alone with another man. "Our local Messalina!" I recalled the words he had spoken with such unwarranted venom.

Still slightly dazed by my recent encounter, I abandoned these fruitless speculations and busied myself with the more concrete of her statements. At least I had fathomed the reason for her dislike of me. She had, apparently, suspected me of acting the over-zealous chaperon to my colleague. In the light of this, I was reasonably convinced that my anonymous letter had come from her. The style and contents were both so obviously Robertian. As for her relationship with Franklin, "the spineless jelly-fish," that could easily be checked. Gerald's father, I imagined, was not the type to stand up under cross-examination. The next step in my curious pilgrimage was clear. Turning down the lane, I made towards the Alstones' house.

Hall, the butler, ushered me into the library, and in a few seconds Franklin came bustling through the doorway.

"You wish to speak to my father, Dr. Swanson?" he murmured, slipping a cold hand into mine. "He is down in the stables——"

"No, Mr. Alstone," I interrupted, "I've come to

Darker Grows the Valley

visit you. There's a little matter which I want you to clear up for me."

Franklin gave me a wintry smile.

"Oh, yes, yes. Won't you sit down?"

His pale eyes played on mine nervously, then flicked away, glancing along the crowded bookshelves to the majestic picture of Seymour Alstone in full hunting costume.

"I want you to confirm some information," I continued, "which I have just got from one of our neighbours. The matter itself is trivial and, at the same time, rather delicate, but it helps to explain away several things that have been bothering me. I came to you myself because I have no desire to make this a matter for the police, and I am particularly anxious to prevent innocent people from being accused of something they did not do."

Franklin coughed and looked down at the carpet.

"You see," I went on, scrutinizing his face closely, "I've just been talking to Mrs. Tailford-Jones."

Franklin's embarrassment at the mention of Roberta's name was so apparent that it seemed hardly necessary to continue my inquisition.

"It refers," I went on, "to a certain interview you had with her in the wood by the disused road—an interview which I happened to have overheard."

Darker Grows the Valley

I noticed that the bald dome of his head had turned an unwholesome pink.

"I don't know what Mrs. Tailford-Jones has been telling you," he said suddenly, "but I must ask you to hear what I have to say before you form any opinion of my actions. It was not through meanness on my part that I decided to stop payment——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Alstone," I broke in, realizing immediately that he supposed Roberta to have been more frank with me than in fact she had. "Let's have this from the beginning. Of course, I understand that it's a personal matter, and one that you have a perfect right to keep from me."

Franklin looked at me with a strange expression in his eyes. His mouth, I noticed, was trembling.

"No, Dr. Swanson, now that she has brought the matter up herself, it will give me great pleasure to be able to confide in someone. I do not trust that woman. I have no wish that you should be left only with her version of the incidents."

"The meeting was made by appointment, of course?" I said, trying to give the impression that I was in full information of the facts.

"By appointment, yes." Franklin threw a look over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Of course, Dr. Swanson, you will appreciate that all this is in strict confidence. It is a highly personal

Darker Grows the Valley

matter, and I should hate to think that my father—well, he is a man of very strong prejudices. It is very difficult to get him to see things in, shall we say, an unbiased fashion? ”

I assured him that whatever he told me would go no further.

“ Good, good.” Franklin was very excited. “ Well, you doubtless know of the unhappy circumstances of my marriage. For many years I have been without the pleasures of—er—feminine society. I think that it was this, coupled with the knowledge that she, too, suffered in a similar manner, that first attracted me to Mrs. Tailford-Jones. It never was a friendship of mutual respect or taste. At the time I never felt really at ease with myself, but against my better feelings I gradually became involved in an affair from which it was more and more difficult to extricate myself.”

He broke off, and his expression was a strange mixture of fear and hatred.

“ Colonel Tailford-Jones, as you know,” he went on, “ has very little to live on except his army pension. Mrs. Tailford-Jones has no money of her own, either. At the—er—crest of our friendship, it seemed only just to me that I should allow her a reasonable sum with which to buy the little things that mean so much to the feminine mind.”

So that explained the local mystery of Roberta’s

Darker Grows the Valley

mink coats and diamond bracelets, I thought with inward amusement. It also explained her reticence about telling me what had actually occurred in the car that night.

"You didn't talk about the marmoset during your meeting with Roberta?" I asked.

"Why—yes, possibly. She was one of the small presents that I gave to Mrs. Tailford-Jones."

He paused, as though expecting some sort of indication that I understood and appreciated his action.

"Naturally," I murmured. "And very generous!"

"Generous I have been with her," he said, with the nearest approach to fierceness I had ever seen in him. "Generous in the extreme. But there comes a time when even I must refuse to finance a woman who obviously looks upon me as nothing more than a convenient source of income—something from which she can obtain the pretty things she uses to attract other men."

He came quite close to me and stared into my face. His whole body was shaking with fury.

"As long as she made some pretence of fidelity, I was amenable," he went on. "But there came a time—well, I need not embarrass you by proceeding further."

He referred, apparently, to my friend's supposed affair with Roberta.

Darker Grows the Valley

“So you told her,” I asked, “that you could no longer give her money?”

“I did!”

Franklin’s lips twisted into a smile of remembered pleasure.

“And she turned nasty?”

“There’s more to it than that——” he began, but was interrupted by the opening of the door.

He started and turned guiltily towards the intruder.

“Mrs. Tailford-Jones is on the wire, Mr. Franklin.”

One of the maids was standing on the threshold. I realized instantly that Roberta had decided to get together with Franklin about my visit. Luckily for me, she had left it too late.

Franklin was glancing at me furtively.

“Tell her I am engaged, please, Mary. I cannot be disturbed.”

The maid nodded and withdrew.

“It was she who made that appointment,” continued Franklin breathlessly, as soon as the door was firmly shut. “I expect she tried to make you think it was I. When her husband had gone off she called me, and, at her suggestion, I picked her up in one of father’s cars and drove to the wood.”

“And there the scene took place?”

“Exactly. I told her precisely what I thought of

Darker Grows the Valley

her. I told her that it was useless to expect anything more from me."

"And her reaction?"

Franklin bowed his head.

"She is not the sort of person from whom one can expect consideration," he said softly. "She demanded a lump sum of money, threatening me with exposure if I refused to give it her."

"Exposure?"

"As you know, Dr. Swanson, my father——"
His hands flopped loosely to his sides.

"You gave in?"

"What else could I do? I arranged to meet her and hand over the money."

"That was to be in the carpenter's shop?"

He nodded.

"On the night the barn burned down?"

Franklin started as though I had accused him of complicity in that affair.

"Yes, yes. I believe that was the night."

Now the story was told, the strange, almost demoniacal force, that had seemed to have taken possession of him, slipped away. He sank down in a chair and blew his nose.

"I must thank you, Mr. Alstone," I murmured, "for being so frank. You can rest assured that your confidences are safe with me. You've been extremely useful, and, while I know I have no

Darker Grows the Valley

authority in all this, I would be grateful if you would answer a few more questions."

He waved the handkerchief in assent, but still did not look up.

"During the time you were in the wood," I asked, "did you, by any chance, hear a car?"

Franklin seemed to be thinking for a moment, his eyes shifting uneasily.

"Why, yes," he said suddenly, "I think I do remember hearing one."

I pricked up my ears.

"About what time?"

"Let me see now." He seemed eager to help. "I should say off-hand that it was sometime about midnight."

"Fine!" I exclaimed. "You didn't see who was in it?"

He smiled faintly.

"I'm afraid I was rather—upset at the time. I did not pay much attention. I doubt if I even saw the vehicle. You know, the trees there are particularly dense."

"Quite. You didn't hear any other sound? The barking of a dog, for example?"

"No. Of that I am sure."

"See any lights?"

He shook his head.

"I just heard the car driving by. That is all."

Darker Grows the Valley

I felt my despondency return. This was no new information after all. Merely corroboration of what Toni and I myself had seen. It did raise once more the complication of someone driving about the countryside in an unlighted car—someone who was not Roberta or Franklin. But there was nothing in it to prove that I had in fact heard that cry. Nothing to help in my attempt to disprove Bracegirdle's accusations.

A few minutes later I took my departure, leaving Franklin standing thin and pathetic before the great oil-painting of the father he so much feared. I thought of the expression I had seen on his face during his diatribe against Roberta, and one thing made itself clear in my mind: Seymour Alstone was not the only person that this strange, thwarted individual feared—and hated.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time I reached home, it was almost noon. I had spent the best part of the morning tracking down what had turned out to be a mare's nest—a mare's nest, incidentally, that left a decidedly unpleasant smell in my nostrils. I had learnt that Franklin had been entangled in Roberta's spider-web; that she had been indulging in a very neat piece of blackmail, and that, in the bargain, she professed to be in love with Toni. But, with all this startling information, I was no nearer any sort of solution to the mystery. If my friend really had been paying those nocturnal visits to Roberta, a definite proof of it would help considerably in absolving him from complicity in the first two killings. It would not, however, explain away the much more damning evidence against him—the blood-stained finger-prints, the search for the revolver, and the so-far undetected clue of the piece of rope. I found myself regretting my dramatic plea to Bracegirdle. To produce an empty bag at the end of

Darker Grows the Valley

the day would be far more harmful than never to have suggested the hunt.

Feeling extremely inadequate, I decided to continue with my policy of annoying the neighbours. Confessions had simply tumbled out of Roberta and Franklin. Perhaps I would strike some more profitable vein in the others. After all, one fact was certain. Somebody must know something.

Before embarking upon my several wild-goose chases, however, I was resolved to call Valerie and hear the worst about the piece of rope. I had been shirking the issue all the morning, but now I felt that anything would be preferable to the vague uneasiness which the presence of this unexplained clue stirred in my mind.

Mrs. Middleton answered the 'phone in one of her pessimistic moods. Valerie was in her room. No, she was not ill; just thoroughly overwrought. No, she could not call her to the 'phone. She was nervous enough as it was without having to be bothered by anything fresh. No, she didn't know what I wanted to say, but she was sure it was something worrying.

I interrupted her, pleading to be granted a short talk with her daughter. It was very important. I would not keep her more than a few seconds.

Grudgingly, Mrs. Middleton conceded, stating that she would put Valerie on the upstairs 'phone.

Darker Grows the Valley

Then, as an afterthought, she announced her intention of listening-in on our conversation.

I was forced to accept this very second best.

Valerie's voice sounded extremely tired. There was also a certain aloofness in her tone the significance of which I could not appreciate. The first few moments I spent in idle chatter for the benefit of Mrs. Middleton. Then I came to the point as directly as I dared.

"Listen, Valerie, you know that thing you gave me yesterday. I want you to tell me where you found it."

"Where I found it?" She seemed surprised. "Why, is there any need?"

My heart sank as I heard her. The piece of rope had now inevitably to be placed on the debit side of Toni's account.

"I see what you mean," I continued despondently. "I just thought you might have some other explanation."

"And I was hoping you had, Doug. Listen, you've got to tell me what happened. You must tell me about everything. Haven't I given you proof that you can trust me?"

I pictured Mrs. Middleton's ear clamped to the receiver, and replied with a sigh:

"I can't say anything now, except that the abscess is coming to a head—and that I'm expecting it to

Darker Grows the Valley

burst to-night at ten o'clock. If we can't do anything before then, I'm afraid the patient will be in a pretty bad way. If you can think of a cure, however desperate, come round at ten. God knows we need it."

With admirable astuteness, Valerie got on to my meaning.

"Very well, Doug. Ten o'clock? I'll be there to see you through, whatever Mother says."

At this point Mrs. Middleton broke in:

"You go back and lie down, Valerie. You've done quite enough talking."

I was just about to hang up the receiver when I realized that Mrs. Middleton, as well as anyone, would do for my next cross-examination.

"Oh, could you spare me a few minutes," I said hurriedly, "if I came right round?"

Mrs. Middleton seemed less chary of her own maiden presence than that of her daughter. I could tell immediately that she suspected me of having some fresh and calamitous news. She agreed to my suggestion almost with eagerness, but added that, whereas she was quite willing to talk with me, her daughter must be left undisturbed for the rest of the day.

When I stepped into her immaculate living-room, she was waiting for me, her small, beady eyes alight with foreboding.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Well, what is it now? Has there been another—er—tragedy? So many dreadful things have happened—so much horror! ”

“ No, Mrs. Middleton,” I replied, with a persuasive smile. “ I’m still trying to clear up the old ones. I came to you in the hope that you’d be able to help me discover the murderer! ”

Mrs. Middleton started, and her eyes opened wide.

“ Murderer! How could I help? ”

“ I must tell you in strict confidence,” I continued, “ that one of our neighbours is going to be arrested. I am convinced of his innocence, but, unless we can find some fresh evidence, he’ll have a hard time proving it.”

Mrs. Middleton was full of shocked curiosity which I would satisfy no further. I assured her that I was in earnest and pleaded with her to let me know whether there was not something, however trivial, that she had been holding back from the police. At first she seemed injured that I should suspect her of hindering justice, but I was almost certain she was not speaking the truth. After several minutes of tactful intimidation on my part, she began to grow nervous. Her bright eyes turned evasively from mine.

“ If there *was* one little thing,” she faltered, “ do you suppose that——”

She broke off, flushing deeply.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Never mind how unimportant it is,” I persuaded. “It may help.”

“Well, if I tell you, is it necessary—I mean, will the police and everybody get to know?”

“Bracegirdle may have to be told. I assure you it will go no farther.”

Mrs. Middleton smiled feebly and fingered the brooch on her bosom.

“I should not like anyone else to be accused for something I did,” she began in a low voice. “Of course, I’ve been miserable for days, but I think you’ll understand when I tell you. I wouldn’t exactly say that I hate him, although he’s done such terrible things to me. But still, however Christian one may try to be, one can never quite forgive a person for causing the death of one’s husband, can one?”

I nodded.

“And for all you may say,” she went on, “I still think he has something to do with it. But I should never have done what I did. Now, if I had had the courage to sign my name, it would have been different. But an anonymous letter——”

“Anonymous letter!” I exclaimed. “So you sent it to Mr. Alstone!”

Mrs. Middleton looked very woebegone.

“I regret it, Dr. Swanson. I really do. But for the moment my feelings got the better of my taste.

Darker Grows the Valley

I swear I would never do such a thing again." She had taken out a handkerchief and was twisting it in her hand like a naughty but contrite schoolgirl. "Can I ask you to keep this to yourself? Of course, I suppose the police should be informed, but——"

I assured her that the maximum of secrecy would be observed and rose to take my leave.

But, after my experience with Roberta, I should have learnt that confessions come not single spies. On the porch Mrs. Middleton took hold of my sleeve and stared up at me with an important expression on her face.

"You say they're going to arrest someone else," she said. "Does that mean that Mark will be released?"

"Why, yes. If Bracegirdle's theory is correct, Mark had nothing whatsoever to do with it."

Mrs. Middleton's mouth moved into a sly smile.

"I'm very glad to hear that," she said. "And if it's really true, I can tell you something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes." She was staring out across the bare strip of lawn. "You remember that face at the window the night Sancho was hurt?"

I nodded.

"Well, it was Mark."

"Mark?"

Darker Grows the Valley

"I was far too startled to recognize anything at the time. But later, when I thought it over, I remembered having seen that dark lock of hair that hangs over his forehead. I recall it vividly. Of course, the face was distorted by the glass, and I thought the lock was some sort of scar. But now I am positive it was he! "

"Why didn't you tell the police? "

Mrs. Middleton's eyes twinkled.

"I am very fond of the boy, and he's done wonders with our garden," she said. "Besides, I was convinced he had nothing to do with the murders. And you know how the police are—always ready to put the worst implication on everything." She took my hand and squeezed it. "You can tell Bracegirdle about the letter. But I think we should keep the other little matter to ourselves."

I departed, feeling that I had always underrated Mrs. Middleton.

Once in the lane I started to consider my next move. I seemed to have developed quite a talent for acquiring useless information. Castles fell at my knock, but, unfortunately, they were not the right castles. It was interesting to know that Mrs. Middleton's spleen against Seymour had got the better of her, and that it had been Mark who had stared at us through the window. But, after all, neither of these discoveries had anything but a

Darker Grows the Valley

negative bearing on the case. For positive information, there was still the Goschens, Peter, Seymour, Edgar, Mrs. Franklin Alstone and Mark Baines. Each of them would doubtless be ripe for confession—each of them but the murderer.

Deciding for the moment to rest on my scanty laurels, I returned home in the hope of finding my room-mate.

Toni was in the living-room when I arrived.

“Well, Doug,” he exclaimed, grinning over the top of the morning newspaper, “have you got a bloodhound, too? I’ve had a big flat-foot following me around all day. He waited two hours outside the hospital this morning and seemed to thrive on it. I’m expecting him to peer furtively through the window at any moment!”

“Listen, Toni,” I began, “there’s something I’ve got to tell you——”

But, as I spoke, Lucinda came in and interrupted me with the announcement of lunch.

For a man with a potentially guilty conscience, I must say that Toni ate with remarkable appetite. Being hungry myself I avoided all controversial subjects until after we had finished eating.

“All right, Doug,” said Toni as soon as we had lighted our pipes and kicked aside the Sunday newspaper. “Let’s hear you pour out your soul.”

“This is serious, Toni. For God’s sake, listen.”

Darker Grows the Valley

"I've been wanting to listen for about two weeks." His eyes were slightly mocking.

Without waiting for any more I burst forth into an account of my talk with Bracegirdle. He did not interrupt me until I came to the reconstruction of his movements on the night of Gerald's death. Then, to my surprise, he started to roar with laughter. It was the healthiest sound I had heard in the house for several weeks. In fact, I had never seen Toni so cheerful. His hot southern nature, which, like Vesuvius, usually lay dormant, now seemed on the verge of unexpected eruption.

"And you listened to that yarn, Doug? Knowing what you know, you let Bracegirdle—hell's bells, man, but you're an old fox." He laughed again.

"Of course I know he must be wrong," I replied, "but you see, his men found you behind the stable looking for the gun yesterday morning. How did you know where it was?"

"I didn't, but I had a little theory of my own. Well, what else have they got against me?"

I went on to describe my visit to Roberta. If Toni had laughed before, this time he bellowed.

"Oh, my God, Doug! How Roberta must have enjoyed making heavy drama out of our cock-eyed little affair. I'd have given a lot to have been a fly on the wall at that interview! Roberta playing

Darker Grows the Valley

the fallen woman all over the room and you very thin-lipped and Sunday-school teacher."

"But don't you see, Toni—at least she gives you an alibi."

"I'm not at all interested in my own alibis. What tickles me is the ones she gives herself. Franklin—*that* human hairpin! And we both thought it was the old man!"

He was still chuckling when I went on to tell him of Mrs. Middleton and her disclosures. It was not until I mentioned the piece of rope that he seemed really interested.

"Darned decent of her, Doug. It means a whole lot when a girl like Valerie suppresses material evidence. Incidentally, we'd better throw it in the fire."

So saying, he snatched it from my hand and shoved it deep among the blazing logs.

"Toni!" I expostulated. "You can't get rid of things like that. We've got to take this business more seriously. It's two o'clock now and in eight hours Bracegirdle's coming round to serve that warrant. You do know something, don't you?"

My friend's mouth twisted into a queer smile as he turned his dark eyes on my face.

"Sure, I know something," he said slowly. "I know just about as much as you do. I'm waiting for you to begin the girlish confidences."

Darker Grows the Valley

"You goddam fool," I said irritably. "I know as much about it as—as Lucinda. And I'm sick of your hints and half-statements. If you want to be arrested, well——"

"You mean," he said incredulously, "that you *really* don't know who shot Gerald Alstone and dumped him in our back-yard?"

"No, of course not. If I had the faintest idea, I wouldn't be sitting here bellyaching at you."

"Well, Doug, if you don't know, then I don't either. Let's start considering a few possibilities, shall we? Personally, I vote for Roberta." He seemed excited, and his hair had fallen over his forehead. "She's destroyed many a young man in her time."

"No sale, Toni. How could she have killed Baines?"

"All right. How about Edgar? I like the little colonel even though he is a snub-nosed gelding. It's rather piquant to think of him playing the werewolf at night times—tying little girls up in trees, disembowelling Queenie, the wages of his wife's sin."

"It doesn't fit," I remarked. "Nothing seems to fit."

"Well, then, the old man himself. Perhaps he can't satisfy his lust for power any longer. No one to bully except the bald Franklin and the blear-

Darker Grows the Valley

eyed Gerald. Whoops and off we go! Over the hills and far away to find a dog, a cat or a goose. Hunting's been lousy this year, by the way."

"Much more likely to have been Franklin," I said, joining against my will in Toni's mood. I was still considerably surprised to hear my room-mate talking like this. For one usually so calm and monosyllabic, this outburst seemed to verge on hysteria.

"Yes, or Peter Foote. For a young man who's travelled widely, this must be a very dull neck of the woods. Why shouldn't he have thrown away his plaster cast and flown to Grindle on the night of the coon-hunt. Dropped Polly in the tree and then lassoed Gerald on his way to tell the police. A little skilful piloting and anyone could pitch a corpse into our garden. Has the idea of an aeroplane occurred to anyone, Doug?"

"Listen, you ass——"

"Or Mrs. Baines—in the intervals of parturition I expect she rides forth on a broomstick, possibly accompanied by Mrs. Middleton. Oh, boy, what a headline! HARPIES HARRY VALLEY. It's worth proving it just for the story."

"Well, there are enough crazy people around Grindle for anyone to prove anything."

"Yes, Doug, and that's why I think that *you* did it. The one sane man amongst us. You—with the

Darker Grows the Valley

possible connivance of Bracegirdle. I don't see why we should leave him out, poor fellow. He has to do something to relieve the tedium of sleuthing."

I rose from my seat.

"Listen, Toni, you must be sensible. Let's get down to it and admit that there's not a single person in this valley who's capable of doing these things."

Toni had stood up, too, and his eyes were shining with uncanny brilliance.

"As you say, Doug, my boy, not a single person was capable——" He broke off. "You give me an idea, Doug. A positive inspiration." He hurried out into the hall and started to pull on his overcoat.

"Hey, where are you going? "

Toni smiled.

"I'm going to ask my shadow to give me a lift to Rhodes. It'll be more fun for him than standing out there in the cold."

"To Rhodes—again? "

"I've been the silent partner long enough. I want action. I'm going to work up the idea you've just given me. Is the library open to-day? "

"Sunday—good Lord, no."

He paused and I noticed that his face fell.

"Damn, damn, damn," he muttered. Then another idea seemed to strike him.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Is young Foote in Rhodes, by the way?"

"I think so. Why?"

"He's got some books I want—some medical books. Saw them on his bed table at the hospital the other day. So, if I can't get into the stacks, I'll borrow his."

"But——?"

Toni had opened the front door, and a gust of cold wind blew into the house.

"Don't worry about me, Doug—and don't worry about yourself. I'll be back in plenty of time for Bracegirdle. Now go and finish your knitting and no more prying into the private lives of your fellow citizens. Good-bye."

He slammed the door and was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DINNER had been waiting almost half an hour when Toni finally returned. With him came Peter Foote, and, between them, they carried five or six medical books, some of which were Peter's, some of which, they explained, had been borrowed from the Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry. As Peter limped upstairs to wash for dinner, Toni ordered me quite peremptorily to mix a big shaker of dry martinis and to have Lucinda lay another place for dinner. It was obvious from his manner that something important was about to happen. In his eye there was a strange, almost triumphant gleam. He was an utterly different man from the mocking sceptic who, that morning, had treated the whole matter of Bracegirdle's warrant with such indifference. I could tell that now he was taking the situation in deadly earnest. Peter, too, seemed eager and garrulous. He gulped down his cocktails and smoked ferociously.

The drinks were potent. Although I had no clue as to what was brewing, I found myself caught up into the prevailing mood of suppressed excitement.

Dinner was one of the tensest meals I have ever

Darker Grows the Valley

sat through—and, incidentally, one of the most alcoholic. Lucinda, disapproving and late for her church meeting, was constantly ordered to bring more and yet more whisky highballs. Over his third, Toni announced mysteriously that he and Peter had been engaged all the afternoon in a very interesting piece of research. He steadfastly refused to reveal anything further. Peter, I could tell, was dying to talk, but, under the eagle eye of my colleague, he was obliged to control himself. We all sat around the table chatting stupidly about anything but the topic which was uppermost in our minds.

At last the pumpkin pie was polished off, and Lucinda stumped away to church. Clasp ing our glasses, we removed to the living-room. I had not been accustomed to this fast and furious drinking, and my brain was rather mu zzy as we pulled up the chairs and grouped ourselves round the blazing fire. Peter, whose leg was still a little stiff, chose a hard, ladder-back chair. Lighting my pipe, I sank down into the arm-chair, while Toni, with his usual passion for undressing, pulled off his coat and waistcoat, unloosened his tie, and sprawled down on the settee.

Above us, Toni's Swiss cuckoo-clock ticked arrogantly on. The wooden hands pointed to eight-forty-five. It brought back to me the astonish-

Darker Grows the Valley

ing circumstances of this assembly. In seventy-five minutes the police would arrive with a warrant. And here was Toni bright-eyed and half drunk, as though the whole affair were some strange, hectic farce.

“ Well, prisoner at the bar,” I began, “ spill the beans if they’re not too half-baked! ”

“ Don’t rush me, Doug.”

My friend reached over towards the books which Peter had arranged by his chair and jerked one from the bottom of the pile. For a moment none of us spoke, then, in a mocking imitation of his classroom voice, Toni started his oration.

“ Gentlemen, as you know, I am only a poor pathologist. But this afternoon I have had the privilege of delving in the realms of morbid psychology and psychiatry. And, before going any farther, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my friend and colleague, Mr. Peter Foote, who is still young and optimistic enough to attach some importance to what is commonly termed the weak sister of medicine. Who, in short, not only has a good library at his command, but also shows all the symptoms of having taken Professor Meyerhof’s extremely dull course on applied psychiatry both seriously and intelligently.”

“ What’s he talking about? ” I asked, turning to Peter. “ Is it all hooey? ”

Darker Grows the Valley

The boy was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees.

"Gosh, no, Dr. Swanson! He's got a theory—a perfectly stunning one."

"And here," continued Toni in the same serio-comic tone, "I have to thank and to acknowledge the suggestions of my colleague and room-mate, Dr. Douglas Swanson, who, by a chance remark, helped me to a scientific and brilliant explanation of the most unreasonable and, at the same time, the most amusing series of incidents——"

"It's almost nine o'clock," I broke in, "and hot air won't warm you when Bracegirdle takes you out into the cold, cold night."

Toni laughed and, pouring some whisky into his glass, handed me the bottle.

"You seem very eager to get rid of me, Doug. Well, we shall see what we shall see. I'm quite prepared to be serious, but I warn you that you'll have to listen to a very dull spiel first. Foote, produce the data."

He threw the book he had been holding at Peter, who opened it at a marked page and handed it back.

"You will remember, Doug," Toni went on, "that in our little talk this morning we agreed that the perpetrator of our local crimes must be suffering under some form of insanity. Furthermore,

Darker Grows the Valley

being less tolerant than you, I suggested that almost any one of our neighbours was screwy enough to be the criminal. You agreed in part. And then—and then, oh, Doug, you made your profound, your illuminating remark which gave me the idea.”

“ If I said anything brilliant, I assure you it was unintentional.”

“ Your words, my dear Douglas, were not brilliant *per se*, and certainly they were not brilliant intentionally. You said, if I remember correctly: ‘ There’s not a single person in this valley who is capable of doing these things.’ Do you see the significance of that word, *single*? ”

Smiling pityingly, I passed the whisky to Peter.

“ I can’t say that I do—unless you mean single as opposed to married.”

“ Come, Doug, this is no time for sex. I mean nothing of the sort. I merely mean single as opposed to double. In short, our murderer is two murderers! ”

“ Good Lord! ” I exclaimed. “ There’s about a ten-million-to-one chance against your finding two similar maniacs in the same small place at the same time. Where’s your respect for statistics? ”

Toni sighed and looked down the pages of his text-book.

“ If you don’t believe me,” he chanted, “ and if

Darker Grows the Valley

you think I lie, go to Dr. Schalkenbaum and he will tell you why. Now, Doug, this is the said Schalkenbaum's book on insanity—used, incidentally, in all the medical colleges from Rhodes to Stamford." He looked up at me, grinning. "In this standard text-book we find a clue. Ah, yes, Miss Agatha Christie, the so exquisite and 'ow you say, needful clue. It has all come out of the little grey cells of Dr. Schalkenbaum. It has a French name—which Poirot could pronounce far better than I—and all the literature on it is either in French or German. Hence Mr. Foote, my polyglot secretary. He's dug up all kinds of stuff to-day and translated it for me. Now, you listen, my boy. It will do away with all your scruples about twin-maniacs, because it officially recognizes them. You can even have some of your beloved statistics." Toni passed the book back to Peter. "Here, you'd better read it. My foreign pronunciation is lousy, and dear Doug's so sensitive."

Peter smiled and took the book.

"I think it's a knock-out, Dr. Swanson," he remarked. "Just listen to this!

" ' *Folie à deux*, or communicated madness. This condition was first accurately described by Lasèque and Fabet in 1877, and later by Regis under the name *folie simultanée* in 1880. It is a condition in which one person (known as

Darker Grows the Valley

the primary patient), usually a stronger or domineering type, infects another person, usually of weaker or inferior intellect, with his or her own insanity and delusions. The process is often a gradual one and is seen most commonly in persons of the same family, where an older member usually infects a younger one. Sexual perversions, isolations, and religious inhibitions are often contributing causes, which may account for the fact that this condition is most frequently met with in lonely country districts. This form of insanity may often pass unnoticed for many years, since the patients generally present all the outward appearances of sanity when encountered individually and apart from each other. But in its later stages, it forces itself upon public notice when the patients, overwhelmed by the strength of their delusion, commit outrages or other anti-social acts which give cause for complaint. The condition is essentially one in which the delusion or frenzy of one individual is communicated to another, who is known as the secondary patient. True cases of *folie à deux* are rare, but there are common manifestations of the same underlying neurosis in the excitation which is imparted from one person to another in revivalist and other mass meetings. Suicide

Darker Grows the Valley

pacts may often be traced to this disorder. Diagnosis is difficult and the treatment is such as one would normally adopt for insanity. . . . ”

Peter put down the book and eyed me eagerly.

“ What do you think of that? ”

“ Very interesting! ” I said sceptically. “ But it smells of the lamp. You may be right, you may be wrong——”

“ Oh, Douglas, Douglas ”—Toni kicked his legs into the air—“ don’t you see that it’s the only explanation? Think of the alibis, man. Everyone in the valley has some sort of an alibi. But this splits them wide open. ‘ Where were you, Dr. Swanson, on the night that Roberta’s marmoset was murdered? ’ ‘ Please, sir, I was with my friend, Dr. Conti.’ ‘ All right, pass along.’ But ”—he leant forward, peering into my face—“ what if you *were* with your friend, Dr. Conti—and, at the same time, you were in the very act of eviscerating the hapless Queenie? ”

“ There’s no need to be so pictorial,” I said. “ But go on.”

Toni winked at Peter.

“ It *must* be right, Doug. Why, there’s so much humour in it—so much good, clean fun. Isn’t there something in you, some deep, secret part of your nature, that would enjoy going off in a car at night

Darker Grows the Valley

with a well-chosen companion; lassoing nasty little girls and stringing 'em up in trees; catching poor, hard-working gardeners and sticking them in their own muskrat-traps; wringing the necks of nice plump geese; shooting squawking kittens; mutilating Sancho Panza; doing old Seymour in the eye by killing his hunting dogs and his grandson? Hoopla! Why, man, the thing is just too fascinating for words, but I *do* insist—and here's the point—I do insist that it wouldn't be any fun alone. These are not the sort of crimes that are committed by a repressed, tortured maniac. They are the handiwork of someone with a robust, Rabelaisian humour. And that someone would *have* to have a crony. A good, back-slapping pal. Someone to laugh with when Polly gets stuck half-way up the tree—someone to——”

“For God's sake shut up!” I cried suddenly.

For some reason I found a curious apprehension creeping over me. Until to-day I had never seen the unemotional Toni like this. His eyes were black and gleaming, and his voice had a tense, high quality which I did not like. The wildest and most horrible suspicions raced through my drink-fuddled mind. Could all this be leading up to a disclosure which neither Peter nor I had expected?

I glanced at Foote, but he smiled reassuringly.

“Let him finish,” he said.

Darker Grows the Valley

“But”—Toni swallowed what was left of his drink—“there’s another thing. Don’t run away with the idea that our murderers were just maniacs. Oh, no, not by a long shot! Their killings are as motivated as those of the best Chicago gangsters. Think how they happened. Our two friends are on one of their nights out. They see a kitten. Goody, goody—they shoot it. But then what? Polly Baines comes tripping along after her darling pet! They see her, and she sees them. She’s only a poor little half-wit girl—but she can talk.” Toni was almost glaring at me. “She can run home to Mother and say: ‘I saw So-and-so and So-and-so shooting my kitty.’ She has only to do that and the game is up. So what do our murderers do? They run and catch her. It’s not much of a step from animals to humans. It must have been fun to tie Polly up in that tree. But it wasn’t only fun—it was policy, too.”

“I see what you mean,” I broke in. “The animals were just killed at random, but Polly Baines and Gerald were all murdered deliberately because they had found out something. You’re most likely right, but that doesn’t help us discover who did it. And it doesn’t help to prove your theory that two people are responsible.”

“Maybe not, Doug. But haven’t you noticed how everyone in the valley *does* hunt in twos? Think of

Darker Grows the Valley

all the licentious couples that swarm in Grindle! How do we know what orgies are indulged in by Seymour and Franklin when doors are barred and shutters are closed? Have you ever tried to imagine the private life of Charlie and Millie Goschen after the children are put to bed and the last cocktail is drained? Take our own dear Middletons. Why shouldn't they turn into gnarled witches as soon as Sancho is disposed of for the night? Why shouldn't they perform the mystic rites of Hecate, clad in their night-attire? Then there's Mark and Mrs. Baines consorting with the skunks, toads and foxes. And there is, or was—Peter and Gerald, young bucks who'd do anything for a lark. Perhaps they used to make clay figures of old Dean Warlock—God bless them!—and stick pins into him. There's you and me, too. People who torture poor, harmless guinea-pigs in a vain effort to cure suffering humanity. We're capable of anything in the eyes of Roberta. Why shouldn't we have developed a passion for killing animals, and then murdered Polly to stop ourselves from being struck off the medical rolls? And Edgar—Edgar and Roberta. But when you come to Roberta the combinations are as infinite as spirochoëtes. Don't you see, man? ”

“ I see that you're drunk, if that's what you mean.”

Darker Grows the Valley

"Oh, Douglas is going prim on us. Oh, you naughty, naughty boy. Go to bed!"

"There's an awful lot of sense in it, Dr. Swanson," put in Peter, who was holding his drinks better than either Toni or I. "Apart from anything else, it makes the actual murders so much easier to understand. I mean, from a physical point of view. It's hard to get a little girl up a tree or a grown man into a trap if you're working single-handed. But if there's two of you, and both possessed of that extraordinary strength of a lunatic . . . !" With youthful confidence in chapter and verse, he picked up another book from the pile at his side. "Now, here's something else. I found it in Dercum on mental disease."

His eyes scanned the page, then he read:

"The secondary patient is always feeble and degenerate and lacking in individuality."

The boy's eyes were shining excitedly as he looked up from the book.

"Don't you see how that helps? All we have to do is to find someone in Grindle who answers that description!"

In spite of myself, I was beginning to get seriously interested.

"Franklin Alstone," I suggested.

"Mr. Tailford-Jones," put in Peter.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Douglas Swanson,” shouted Toni.

I started to laugh weakly. A glance at the clock checked me.

“Listen,” I said, as calmly as I could, “the time is now nine-fifteen. We have exactly forty-five minutes in which to discover something real, definite and tangible. Instead of getting down to it, we’re getting drunk and indulging in an orgy of wild speculations. It’s not me who’s going to be arrested, so I have no personal interest in the affair, but I do suggest that we try and be sensible, if only to save the most promising young pathologist in Rhodes from his own marble slab.”

Peter smiled and Toni clapped uproariously.

“Personally,” I continued, “I don’t think a great deal of your theory. In the first place, it *is* a theory. In the second, I have no faith in *folie à deux*, Schalkenbaum or no Schalkenbaum, Dercum or no Dercum. It is my own belief that it was invented by alienists of small scruples in order to save wealthy murderers from the death-penalty. No one had ever heard of it until the Loeb-Leopold case, and no one would have heard of it then if a bunch of millionaires hadn’t been involved.”

“Douglas, Douglas,” put in Toni, “I was waiting for you to bring that up. The Loeb-Leopold case was something quite different. It was sexual. The examination of the victim’s body definitely proved

Darker Grows the Valley

that. Now, our little affair has nothing to do with sex. I maintain that it started off as an escape mechanism—a frenzy springing from an ebullient and youthful lust for sport. Later, through force of circumstance, it developed into a half sadistic, half panic-stricken killing of witnesses or supposed witnesses.”

“I’m not so sure you’re right.” Peter was leaning forward eagerly. “I don’t see why it shouldn’t have been sexual in a less obvious form. The bodies weren’t violated, but you notice that, at any rate, the first two victims were not dead when they were hauled up the tree and pushed into the trap. There were no bullets in them. Now”—his voice rose excitedly—“it’s quite a common form of perversion to feel a desire to hurt without actually killing. Why shouldn’t two people who, for some reason or other, were unable to have ordinary relations, have indulged in this sort of thing instead?”

“Good God!” I broke in. “Edgar and Roberta! That’s the first sensible thing that’s been said to-day.”

Toni was smiling curiously.

“You’re right there, Doug. That’s another of your so very brilliant remarks. It’s the first definite piece of evidence we possess.”

In the brief moment of silence that followed, I consulted my watch.

Darker Grows the Valley

“ Nine-twenty-two! ” I exclaimed. “ What are we going to do about it? There’s not much time.”

“ There’s time enough,” said Toni.

He rose suddenly and stood in front of us. His smile had faded and his mouth was twisted in an ugly curve. His eyes still on ours, he moved slowly to his coat and took something from it which he slipped into his trouser pocket.

I stared at him, feeling a spasm of alarm.

“ What on God’s earth are you doing? ” I asked.

He plunged his hand into the pocket.

“ Toni, what have you got there? ”

He did not speak.

We all three gazed at each other in silence as he produced a ball of thick cord. Involuntarily I rose and crossed to Peter’s chair.

Then Toni pounced.

I received the full strength of his enormous body on my shoulder and, crashing to the ground, hit my head against the edge of the table. Dazed and horrified, I scrambled to my feet to find him bending over Peter, twisting the cord round and round him and binding him to the chair. My friend’s lips were moving, but I could hear no sound coming from them. Peter was struggling fiercely and kicking out with his one good leg.

“ Toni, you’re crazy! ” I shouted.

Darker Grows the Valley

“Crazy, am I?” Sweat was gleaming on his forehead as he turned abruptly and stared into my eyes. “I’ll show you.”

I made a move towards Peter, who was now strapped tightly to the chair, but Toni gripped my shoulder and held it firm. His face was utterly transformed.

“You see that boy, do you?”

I nodded weakly.

“Well, take a good look at him. He may be the only specimen of his kind you’ll ever see. He’s—he’s our—primary patient.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE blow on the head, combined with the liquor, had temporarily stupefied me. For a moment I could do nothing but stare at the amazing spectacle before me. Toni, huge and wild, was standing over the bound figure of Peter Foote, his fist clenched. He seemed utterly to have forgotten my existence.

"You killed Polly Baines," he was shouting. "You killed Jo Baines. And, incidentally, you killed Gerald Alstone. You think I've got nothing on you, don't you? Well, you're wrong. And, what's more, *you're* going to do a little bit of talking, too." He gave a short laugh. "You see that clock over there? The hands point to nine-twenty-nine. In just one minute the cuckoo will pop out, and in just thirty-one minutes Bracegirdle will be here. Now, don't you think it would be nice if we could tell him the whole story before he takes you away?"

Peter was staring up at him, his face a picture of

Darker Grows the Valley

studied bewilderment. He moved uncomfortably on the chair.

"This is hurting my leg rather, Dr. Swanson," he said calmly. "I wonder if——"

Toni swung round on me like an angry bear.

"You keep out of this, Doug. It needs an Italian on the job. We make good gangsters and we know how to make little rats squeal!"

"God knows what you're doing," I exclaimed, finding my voice at last, "but I can tell you right here and now that, if all this is a bit of cheap drama, you're cooking your own goose and, what's more, you can't expect any sympathy from me."

As I finished speaking, the bird shot out of the clock and cuckooed once.

Toni laughed.

"That's the answer to you, Doug." He turned back to Peter. "Now, I'm going to tell you what I know, and afterwards I'm going to make *you* finish the story. Come on, Doug. You're so goddam punctilious, you can be the jury."

"Dr. Swanson, I wonder if I could trouble you for a cigarette." Peter's voice was casual.

I lit one and put it in his mouth, loosening the cord around his broken leg.

"Are you quite comfortable?" I asked.

"Yes, I don't mind."

Darker Grows the Valley

Toni pushed me aside. He had rolled up his sleeves and was standing squarely in front of Peter, his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"In the first place, Peter Foote," he began, "you're a nasty spoilt brat who knows all the answers just because he took a trip round the world. In the second place, animals don't like you—and that's never a healthy sign. Valerie's wretched dog growls whenever it sees you. Did it growl, by the way, that night you lassoed it and started dragging it behind a car?"

"If this is the best you can do, Toni," I broke in, "God help you. And God help me for being such a fool as to let you do it."

"It's all right, Dr. Swanson," remarked Peter. "Let him have his fun."

Toni bent his arm, revealing the strong muscles that rippled under the skin.

"Fun later," he said. "Business now. Those horses kicked you the night you went in to fetch them out of the barn. Pretty canny of them to recognize a killer even when you were saving them, wasn't it?"

"Most absorbing!" murmured Peter. "Why don't you write to Ripley about it?"

"I expect you'd like it if I did," went on Toni swiftly. "You enjoy publicity, don't you, Foote? That's why you went into the fire—to be the centre

Darker Grows the Valley

of attraction. Exhibitionism is only another manifestation of sadism, after all."

"At any rate," I put in, "you can't say it wasn't brave of him."

"Brave! All his week-ends in the valley were brave and dramatic. Incidentally, have you ever realized that all the crimes happened over the weekend?" He turned to Peter. "The only time you were in Grindle. It was lucky that Baines found out about you on Sunday, wasn't it? If it had been any other day, you'd have had to make a special trip to kill him, and then even the dear, dumb Bracegirdle might have cottoned on to something."

"How d'you mean, Baines 'found out' about him?" I asked.

Toni turned to me excitedly.

"Didn't it ever occur to you to wonder why Baines was so eager to see you? He wanted to tell you he'd discovered the criminal. Most likely he had caught Peter snooping around Grindle Oak, noticed the buzzards, and drew his own conclusions. Of course, we can't be certain of the actual facts, but that's the way it happened. He didn't tell the police, simply because he was too much afraid of old Seymour to say anything against one of his guests—his grandson's chief buddy at that!"

"But where's your proof?" I exclaimed.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Proof! Hell, there's proof. Remember that 'phone call Baines made to fix up a date with you for Sunday morning? Who overheard it? Gerald and—Peter. Now they claimed that they met Roberta in the road and she wheedled the information out of them. But did you or your pal, Bracegirdle, ever check up on what happened? No, you did not. But I did. Roberta claims that Peter mentioned the matter to her of his own accord, and, for the first time in her life, she is telling the truth. Don't you see? Peter was very careful to make it certain that everyone in the valley should know about that eight o'clock appointment before he went out, found Baines, and dragged him behind the car to the Mill Pool."

"Curiouser and curiouser," I murmured.

"And I'm not through yet. Have you ever told a patient that he has some disease, Doug? Of course you have. Well, what's the first thing he does? He buys all the books on the subject he can lay his hands on. Why did Peter have all those books on morbid psychology? Why did he research with such ardour into the intricacies of *folie à deux* this afternoon? I'll tell you why. It's because he suffers from *just that disease*."

"Nice way to show your gratitude," remarked Peter placidly.

Throughout these bizarre proceedings, he had

Darker Grows the Valley

preserved an unruffled calm. He seemed almost to be enjoying the situation.

Toni had turned away and was grabbing a book.

"And since our evidence all seems to be coming out of books, Mr. Jury—here's one that might interest you. Its name is *Cannibal Quest*, and I borrowed it from Peter just for a little light reading. It's all about those fascinating East Indies of which our young friend is so fond. There's a lot of absorbing information in it. In particular, it describes the habits of the native Papuans—an intriguing race. They bury their dead—in trees!"

I gave a gasp of surprise.

"But there's a difference," he went on relentlessly, "between those savages and our civilized friend here. They hang their corpses up dead. Peter Footes prefer to have them—alive!" He pressed his face close to Peter's so that his black, Italian hair almost touched the boy's cheek. "God, there's nothing bad enough to do to you. If I——"

"Go on with the evidence, Toni," I interrupted, fighting back a crowd of insane impulses which were invading my senses. "You've only got a quarter of an hour. No time to waste on monkey business."

"Well, now we come trotting up the last lap, Doug." Toni laughed triumphantly. "Here's the confession we got from his very mouth. You heard

Darker Grows the Valley

just now how Peter Foote tried to build up a case against Roberta and the poor little colonel. That was very skilful of him, but he made one bad mistake. He told us that Polly was *alive* when she was trussed up in that tree. Well, how did he know? ” He swung round to face me. “ It was given out in all the newspapers that Polly was shot. Those bullets from Seymour’s guns on the coon-hunt were supposed to have been the shots of the murderer. The real medical evidence was too beastly to publish. You, Bracegirdle, the ballistic expert, Brooks and myself were the only ones to know the truth. The only ones—excepting the murderer! ”

“ Listen, Toni,” I broke in, “ we’ve got to keep our heads. Someone might easily have told him.”

“ Told him? Doug, and you’re supposed to be a doctor! Would *you* tell a layman the secrets of the morgue? Can you imagine Brooks doing it—or Bracegirdle—or me? No, sir. Foote knew that kid wasn’t shot simply because he didn’t shoot her.” He turned back to Peter. “ You went a bit too far that time in your zeal for scientific explanations.”

The sweat had broken out on Peter’s forehead.

“ Dr. Conti,” he said, and there was a strange dignity in his tone, “ will you kindly release me at once? You’re hurting my leg and you’re being libellous. My father will bring suit against you for this. He——”

Darker Grows the Valley

"Yes," cut in Toni. "You're right there. Your father most likely *will* bring suit. And, what's more, he'll most likely win his case. I've got evidence to burn, but I realize it's only circumstantial. Now, we're going to make it positive. That's where you come in!"

"Toni!" I exclaimed. "We're both absolutely crazy. We're forgetting the only two significant things. Peter has a watertight alibi for the burning of the barn. And he was laid up in hospital at the time of Gerald's death. If you can get over that, I'm with you."

"I can get over that," remarked Toni grimly, "for the simple reason that I know (a) who burned the barn, and (b) who killed Gerald Alstone. But you must trust me for that. Now, the time is ripe for a little persuasion."

My room-mate's voice was quiet, but the strange wildness which had been in him all day seemed to be increasing steadily as the clock ticked on towards ten. Now, it was surging up in him like a great wave. He sprang on Peter and gripped him by the arm.

As he did so, a curious thing happened—a thing which, to this day, I regret with all my heart. I do not want to excuse myself, but I had been drinking pretty heavily, and the whole crazy affair had played havoc with my reason. As I watched Toni bending

Darker Grows the Valley

over the boy, I felt some of his frenzy become communicated to me. A few moments ago I had laughed at the idea of *folie à deux* as a clinical entity, but now—gradually, imperceptibly—I began to understand the sensations of the secondary patient. . . .

I cannot remember exactly what happened in those brief, fierce moments before the arrival of Bracegirdle. I was caught up in a spasm of wild, almost insane fury against the boy whom I, as well as Toni, now believed guilty. Things happened which should never have happened. But, dazed and half delirious as I was, I recall nothing but Peter's final shriek of agony and his eyes gleaming mad and evil when he shouted:

"You fools, you fools! It wasn't me—it was Gerald!"

That brought me back to my senses. Even Toni quieted down. We stood back from Peter Foote, staring into his eyes.

"Yes," the boy babbled, his face grey with hatred, "it was Gerald, and I tried to stop him. You can't prove a thing against me—and, even if you could, you wouldn't dare. And I'll tell you why you wouldn't dare, Dr. Conti. You killed Gerald Alstone yourself!"

At that moment a car drew up outside, and there were steps on the gravel. Throwing a warning look

Darker Grows the Valley

at Toni, I hurried out into the hall. As I opened the door, something pushed past me, but I was still too bemused to notice it. Valerie was standing on the porch, her eyes dark and worried.

"Listen, Doug," she whispered, gripping my arm, "I've just passed Bracegirdle down the lane. Is he coming here?"

I nodded.

"Yes, he's bringing the warrant!"

"My God! We must be quick. You've got to tell me what to say. I'll do anything, say anything you want me to." She smiled valiantly. "You know I'm all with you, Doug, don't you?"

I patted her shoulder and led her into the hall, closing the door behind her.

"Doug! What on earth's the matter with you?" I suppose it had been too dark on the porch for her to notice my disarray. "You look simply ghastly. Are you——"

She broke off at the sound of angry snarling issuing from the living-room. We both made a move towards the door, to see Sancho Panza creeping out, his hair bristling, his teeth gleaming white. He was followed by Toni, whose appearance was even more grotesque than my own.

"Final proof!" he was shouting. "Proof of the growling dog! Sancho, you're a regular sleuth."

At the sight of Valerie, he pushed a hand through

Darker Grows the Valley

his hair and approached her with an admirable show of composure.

“Hello, my dear!” he said, grinning. “I’m afraid we’re in no fit state to entertain a respectable female friend at the moment. Pardon the hair!”

As he spoke, another car swung up the drive. Valerie glanced at me, her face deathly pale.

“Bracegirdle!” she whispered.

Then, from behind us, came a faint whirring followed by a sharp click. The whole air was suddenly vibrant with sound. It was ten o’clock.

“Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo . . .”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HALF an hour later Bracegirdle, Toni, Valerie and myself were seated around the dining-room table. The only illumination came from a great three-forked candlestick which stood gaunt and medieval on the highly polished oak. We must have made rather a strange group, haggard and hollow-eyed like phantom guests at a phantom dinner-party. We had been listening to Toni, who, restored to his sober, scientific self, was trying to convince Bracegirdle of the truth of his theory.

In the living-room waited Peter Foote with two policemen. I think he was uppermost in all our thoughts as we sat there—adding a final touch of horror to the strange fantasy of the evening.

“Quite apart from anything else, Bracegirdle,” Toni was saying, “we have his confession. Dr. Swanson heard it, too.”

The deputy shook his head.

“Doesn’t mean a thing, Dr. Conti. A clever lawyer could tear that down in a minute. Extortion—threats—violence. It might be very bad for you and Dr. Swanson.”

Darker Grows the Valley

“Toni, may I ask something?” For the first time since Bracegirdle’s arrival, Valerie spoke. She leaned forward, and her movement was curiously echoed by her shadowy reflection in the table. “Maybe I haven’t followed you properly, but are you suggesting that Peter Foote killed Gerald, too?”

Toni did not answer.

“Exactly, sir.” Bracegirdle’s honest blue eyes looked searchingly into his. “Miss Middleton has put her finger on the weak spot in your argument, Dr. Conti. Young Foote had a perfect alibi for the time of Gerald Alstone’s death—don’t you see how the defence could break your case down completely on that? You see, I’m willing to believe that someone quite different *might* have killed the boy, but you’d never convince a jury that it wasn’t the same madman who did the other killings. The circumstances were so similar—the dragging behind the car——”

He paused, and for a few moments the room was absolutely silent. We were all staring abstractedly into the yellow light of the candles.

“I know who killed Gerald Alstone,” broke in Toni suddenly.

I felt Valerie start and then I saw her eyes, wide and anxious, staring into mine.

“Dr. Conti, are you serious?” Bracegirdle’s voice was stern.

Darker Grows the Valley

"Yes, I've known since this morning, but I wasn't able to piece it all together until I was sure about Peter Foote."

Why, oh, why were Valerie's eyes staring so frightenedly into mine?

"May I begin at the beginning?" asked Toni politely.

Bracegirdle nodded.

"Well, it really started the night of the fire—or rather, just a little earlier in the evening, when Miss Middleton's dog was hurt. You see, I've never been quite frank about what happened that night because—well, I didn't want to get someone into trouble."

Bracegirdle stirred uneasily.

"You needn't name names if you don't want to, Dr. Conti. We aren't so dumb as you sometimes think, us policemen, and we can shut our eyes to things as often as not."

"Thanks, Bracegirdle. Well, I'll go back to that night when we were all at the Middletons'. There was a face at the window, if you remember, which scared the ladies quite badly. It didn't scare me because I recognized it at once as belonging to Mr.—er—Nameless. I went outside by myself to investigate and found I was right. He was holding the dog in his arms, and the story he told was about as horrible as anything I've heard. He had just stopped his Ford by the roadside when he saw a car moving

Darker Grows the Valley

towards him—a car without lights. From behind it came a series of cries such as are best left to the imagination. Luckily, our friend had a knife and a great deal of courage. He ran forward, threw himself down on the road and hacked the rope which held the dog. The car sped on, but our friend had heard—or thought he heard—a voice coming from it. It was, so he claimed, the voice of—Gerald Alstone.”

Whether or not we had expected this, I do not know, but we all started and stared at Toni incredulously.

“You may well stare,” he continued, “and that’s just what I did when I took the dog from the arms of Mr.—Nameless. I must admit that there was murder in his eye. I argued with him and implored him not to be impulsive, but I was talking to deaf ears. He jumped into his car and rode off in a fury. I strongly suspect that he rode in the direction of Mr. Alstone’s barn——”

Bracegirdle closed one eye at me.

“I’m only listening with half an ear, Doctor,” he said.

“Well,” Toni continued, “you see the awkwardness of my situation. Our friend was not very strong mentally and I had no reason to believe his word. At the same time, Bracegirdle, I couldn’t come to you, because if I’d been wrong it would have meant jail for Mr. Nameless. Arson is a serious business.

Darker Grows the Valley

Besides, he was a hero—not only for saving the life of Miss Middleton's dog, but also——”

Bracegirdle winked again.

“I imagine he felt pretty badly when he found the horses were in that barn,” he said mildly. “I think that was punishment enough.”

“Exactly—and you do see my position, don't you? I couldn't believe then that a weak, puny individual like Gerald should be responsible for such acts of violence. Of course, I knew that there was insanity in his mother's family. I knew that was why Seymour arranged the divorce and brought the boy up in cotton padding. But the *folie à deux* theory didn't come to me until this morning. Gerald, as a solitary maniac, I could not credit. I didn't realize then what a perfect secondary patient he would make—how ripe he was for the influence of a person like Peter Foote.”

“But what happened next?” broke in Valerie quickly. “What did you do after the barn was burned down?”

“I decided to tax Gerald with Sancho's mutilation as soon as possible. But I was pretty busy at the hospital and didn't have a chance to see him until the night of the coon-hunt. I believe my behaviour that evening has been criticized by a lot of you.” He smiled at Bracegirdle. “I must have seemed queer, but I had no alternative. I didn't want to

Darker Grows the Valley

make a scene about Gerald in public in case I was wrong. I didn't want to accept any Alstone hospitality in case I was right. At the reception, Gerald kept close to his friends and I couldn't get him alone. He was, also, one of the first off on the hunt. After the others had gone, I pottered around for a while, waiting, and then I went home at about quarter-past eleven."

He paused a moment, straightening one of the candles which had crooked over sideways.

"After I'd put the car away in our garage," he continued slowly, "I remembered with, I'm afraid, rather belated gallantry, that I was responsible for Miss Middleton"—he bowed and smiled at Valerie—"so I got it out again and drove back. At about eleven-thirty, as I was going down the Alstones' drive, I saw Gerald. He was running like mad towards the house. I put my car behind the stables next to Doug's, where it had been before. Then I went into the house by the backdoor. Gerald was in the gun-room. I heard him give the number of the hospital and ask for Peter Foote——"

"So that clears up the 'phone call," remarked Bracegirdle to himself. "Go right ahead, Doctor."

"Then he must have realized I was there, because he hung up all at once. He was in a terribly nervous state, but he told me nothing about the discovery of Polly Baines's body. Well, I accused

Darker Grows the Valley

him point-bank of mutilating Sancho. You must remember that then I knew nothing of Peter Foote and had no real reason to connect Gerald with anything so—er—boisterous as the death of Baines. He stood with his back to the wall like a frightened animal, but he didn't say a word. Then, suddenly, he reached up to the gun-rack and pulled a revolver on me. Luckily, I had enough sense to realize that Mr. Alstone is far too efficient a man to leave his guns loaded in their racks, so I took it away from him"—Toni paused and looked round a trifle apologetically—"and then I gave the little bas—beast the soundest thrashing he's ever had in his life. I knocked him down in every way I could think of, and made his nose bleed until the room looked like the retreat from Mons."

"The trail of blood across the floor!" I cried. "That was made by Gerald's nose bleeding!"

"Exactly, Doug. But I didn't hurt him badly, because when I was through he made for the door and gave me a look which would have curdled all the milk in Cotuit County. 'I'll get even with you, Dr. Conti,' he said, and I can still hear him saying it. 'I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do!'"

"You never saw him again, Dr. Conti?" asked Bracegirdle.

"Not until—until"—for some unknown reason

Darker Grows the Valley

Toni was smiling broadly at me—"until yesterday morning when they dug him up in our back-yard."

"Well, why didn't you come to me with your story as soon as Gerald was reported missing?"

"I intended to, Bracegirdle. After Gerald left the gun-room I walked round to call on Mr. Nameless to see if I could get him to come forward and give evidence. While I was there, someone came in to tell him about the discovery of Polly's body. I left immediately because I was keen to get in on that autopsy. After taking Miss Middleton home, I drove into Rhodes, as you know, and worked all night with Brooks."

"But you said just now that you knew who killed Gerald Alstone!" said Bracegirdle, with an impatient glance at his watch.

"Yes, I thought I knew that night. In fact, I was pretty sure. But I had reasons for keeping it to myself."

"It strikes me you've kept a good deal to yourself." Bracegirdle's tone was sharp.

"Exactly." Toni smiled. "But it turns out to be just as well that I did. Otherwise an innocent man would certainly have been put to a—er—great deal of inconvenience."

"But you know now——"

"Yes. I know now and I can prove it, thanks to the efficiency of your men, who discovered the

Darker Grows the Valley

revolver and, incidentally, almost arrested me for trying to do the same thing yesterday morning."

I stared at him, trying to make up my mind whether or not he was bluffing. Had he still some evidence which none of the others of us had been able to obtain? Did he know something which would lead yet another inhabitant of the valley to arrest? The whole crazy pack of our neighbours rose up in my mind like the cards in *Alice in Wonderland*. There was Millie and Charlie, far too normal, surely, to commit anything so desperate as murder. There was Seymour, grim and tyrannical; Franklin, loveless and embittered; Roberta, grotesque and hysterical; Edgar, insignificant, yet somehow dangerous. Which of them was Toni about to accuse?

Valerie had risen to her feet, her face obscured in the shadows.

"Toni, you're crazy." Her voice was high and tense. "You can't know! You can't know for certain!"

Toni glanced up at her and continued calmly:

"Consider first Gerald's character. I want you to try and put yourself in his place on the night of the coon-hunt. Remember he was the weak sister of the pleasant little duet. The mighty Foote had been laid up with a broken leg for over a week and Gerald was on his own. You can imagine his sensations when that body fell from the tree. You can imagine the fear

Darker Grows the Valley

that gripped his vitals as he ran homeward. He goes to the 'phone to call Peter and tell him the game is up and then—on top of it all—I appear like an avenging fury. I beat the hell out of him. Unnecessarily, because he is licked already. Licked, yes, but remember he has a warped and revengeful nature. He has vowed to get even with me. That alone was uppermost in his mind when he left me to meet—as it was afterwards revealed—his own death.”

“Who killed him?” broke in Bracegirdle sharply. I heard Valerie catch her breath.

“Who killed him?” Toni laughed. “I said just now it was Peter Foote. So it was indirectly. But actually it was—Gerald Alstone.”

He stopped suddenly, and for a moment there was absolute silence. Valerie sank into her chair, passing a hand across her forehead. Her hair looked almost grey in the half-light.

“I think,” went on Toni, “that he had made up his mind to suicide the moment Polly’s corpse fell out of the tree. But after his interview with me, his distorted imagination fixed on a far more cunning and original plan. What if he were to arrange his suicide to look like murder? And not only to look like murder, but like another in a chain of murders! A body dragged behind a car—the old instinct comes out in him. He loads his gun and

Darker Grows the Valley

sneaks out to where my car is parked. A piece of rope round his ankle is tied to my bumper. Bang! He dispatches himself and the evidence remains with me—a doubly damning piece of evidence because it is a dark night, the snow is falling, and it's ten to one against my seeing the body when I start the car."

Bracegirdle bent forward over the table.

"You suggest that Gerald Alstone tied himself to your car and then committed suicide?"

"I suggest precisely that. You found the gun just where I parked that night, didn't you? In fact, it was in the exact position where it would have fallen from his hand."

"Was that what gave you the idea?"

"No, not exactly that. As I told you, I had had other suspicions."

"Dr. Conti, I want you to understand me quite clearly." Bracegirdle had risen to his feet and was now very much the police officer. "Don't think I am not grateful for your suggestions, and don't imagine for a minute that I want to throw discredit on your testimony. I do feel, however, that for a man in your position, a professor in one of our leading universities, you have acted in a manner that is open to serious criticism. It is over two weeks since Gerald Alstone died, and all this time you have withheld material evidence."

Darker Grows the Valley

Toni spread out his hands and smiled.

"Would *you* have come forward in my place, Bracegirdle? Remember, things looked pretty black for me even before the body was found in my own back-yard. I know enough about police routine to realize that you would probably worm some sort of story out of the servants to the effect that I was seen snooping around the Alstones' house on the night of the crime. I imagine you probably found my finger-prints. If I was to come forward with a gratuitous tale of having beaten up the corpse about five minutes before its death, it would have been asking for trouble. It could easily be proved that I had ample reason to want to kill Gerald——"

"In other words," interrupted the deputy, "you deliberately impeded the course of justice to save your own skin."

The sentence was scarcely finished when we heard a commotion in the living-room. Suddenly the door was kicked open and Peter Foote, his wrists handcuffed behind him, stood in the doorway.

"You're right, Inspector!" he cried, and if there had been any doubt before of his madness there was none now. "He saw Gerald and me in that car the night we lassoed Sancho Panza. The goddam hypocrite pretended to be shocked because the poor little animal was being hurt. But he did worse than that himself. He killed Gerald, I tell you—"

Darker Grows the Valley

and he would have killed me if I hadn't been in the hospital. Ask him—ask him——” His voice had risen to an ugly screech.

Two stalwart figures loomed up behind him. Bracegirdle nodded them towards the door.

“Take him out to the car,” he said. “I’m coming in a minute.” He turned to us. “Dr. Conti, I’m pretty well satisfied with your story, but there are one or two little points that’ll still have to be cleared up. It’s too late to do anything about it to-night, but I shall want to see you and Dr. Swanson in the D.A.’s office to-morrow morning.”

The deputy took his leave and outside we could hear the police car drive off. Neither Valerie, Toni nor I spoke for a few moments. Then Toni lit a cigarette and tilted his chair.

“After all that talking,” he said, smiling, “I need a drink. I’m hoarse.”

He hurried into the kitchen, and I could hear him attacking the ice noisily. Valerie and I stood close together and looked at each other. Her eyes were shining and I thought I had never seen her so lovely before.

“He’ll be all right,” I said softly. “Don’t worry any more.”

“I’m not worried, Doug. I—oh, it’s all so beastly.”

I put my arm round her.

Darker Grows the Valley

"It was wonderful of you not to say anything about that piece of rope you took from the car," I whispered.

"Oh, that was nothing," she said dully. "Any girl would have done that to save the man—she loved." She raised her head and gave a sad little laugh. "The only trouble is that he doesn't seem to realize it, does he?"

"Perhaps he does," I said foolishly, and as I spoke, I felt her move a little towards me. Her cheek brushed my face and then I felt her lips light against mine.

"Good-bye, Valerie," I said quietly, "and please don't think I'm sorry about it. He's a swell guy."

"Good-bye, Doug."

Toni was coming into the room with some tinkling glasses.

"You're not going, Valerie?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

As she turned at the door, I caught a glimpse of her eyes wet with tears. Then she was gone.

"Come on, Doug." My friend's voice was cheerful. "Just time for a quick one."

I took a glass from the tray and then set it down again.

"Listen, Toni," I said, "you've manhandled me pretty badly to-night, and I ought to be extremely angry with you. But I'm not."

Darker Grows the Valley

"I should damn well hope you aren't."

"Well, you certainly deserve a bawling-out for not spilling the beans earlier. Bracegirdle was dead right. Of course, I understand your silence at first when you wanted to protect Mark. It was damn' decent of you—but why on earth did you keep quiet for so long after the night of the coon-hunt? You may fool Bracegirdle into believing you were scared on your own account, but you can't fool me."

Toni sipped his drink and smiled very engagingly.

"Well, Doug, how would you have acted if—say—you'd thought that *I* murdered Gerald?"

"What the hell has that got to do with it?"

"You see, I was quite convinced until yesterday that *you* had done it. Not that I blamed you, mind. God knows, I almost polished the little bastard off myself."

"You thought *I* murdered Gerald Alstone?"

"Naturally! I thought Mark had told you about the dog and you'd gone one better than me. And then, after the coon-hunt, when I saw with my own eyes——"

"Saw what?"

Toni gave an impish chuckle.

"You mean you haven't tumbled to that even yet? You see, our cars were near together; they're both Plymouths. And when I got back the second time, I happened to park on the other side of you."

Darker Grows the Valley

I stared at him in amazement.

"Yes," he continued, "Gerald made a mistake. He tied himself to *your* car."

"Oh, my God!" Light seemed to be pouring in on me from every direction. "You mean that I dragged Gerald all the way home? That it was my car Mrs. Baines saw? That it was me who made those stains under the bridge——"

"Yes, Doug. You never were very good at getting into the garage, anyway. Just like you to drop the corpse off in the yard."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

Toni was enjoying my bewilderment.

"And I'm very sorry to say, Doug, that it was you I suspected of doing the murder. I gave you a chance to be confidential on several occasions, but you didn't seem to want to talk. It was only when the body turned up yesterday that I realized it must have been an accident. That's what made me look—elsewhere. God knows, you're dumb, but you're not dumb enough to leave such damning evidence on the door-mat."

"You say you saw the body behind *my* car!"

"With these very eyes."

"Good God!" I clutched the sleeve of his coat and almost spilt his drink. "Did Valerie see it, too?"

"No one will ever know, but I think not. I

Darker Grows the Valley

kept her engaged in idle banter to divert her attention."

My face fell.

"So she thought it was your car she took the rope from?"

"Of course not, you mutt! Anyone can tell yours from mine in the daytime. Besides, she's been calling me wildly all day asking what lies she could tell to save you from the electric chair."

My thoughts were racing now.

"To save the man I love. . . . He doesn't seem to realize it. . . ."

Outside I could hear Valerie starting her car. I knocked over a chair on my way to the door.

"Hey, Doug, are you crazy?"

"Sure!" I shouted. "Just another case of *folie à deux!*"